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TRANCE
(A partial translation of *Trance* by Pedro Cabiya)

by
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The Author

Pedro Cabiya

Pedro Cabiya is one of the most highly regarded specialists on the Caribbean in the Dominican Republic. Of Puerto Rican origin, Cabiya is a writer, scriptwriter, editor, cultural critic and professor at the Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE). He obtained an M.A. in medieval literature from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1996. Later on, he pursued a doctoral degree in Caribbean Literature at Stanford University.

Cabiya founded and directed *Aire* (“Air”), the literary complement to the weekly newspaper *Claridad* (“Clarity”), in which he published the majority of his early works. In 1992, the Peruvian critic Julio Ortega invited him to form part of *La Cervantiada*, an anthology of literary works by Latin American writers in celebration of *El Quijote*. Cabiya shares this honor with literary greats such as Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Alfredo Bryce Echenique.

In 1999, the author published his first volume of short stories, *Historias tremendas* (“Tremendous Stories”), declared the best book of the year by Pen Club International and by Instituto de Literatura Puertorriqueña. In 2003, he published *Historias atroces* (“Atrocious Stories”), a collection of five short stories. Both books have become cultural icons and have attracted not only a large number of readers, but fervent fans as well.

Juan Puchesne Winter, recognized literary critic and professor at Emory University, has said that Cabiya is *lectura gourmet* (“gourmet reading”). As a result, his books are already material for dozens of doctoral theses. His first novel, *La cabeza* (“The Head”), was published in 2005, followed by *Trance* in 2007, and *Malas Hierbas* in 2011. In his latest publication, he rewrote and remade the classic novel from the Spanish Romantic Movement *María*, written by Jorge Isaacs, under the title *María V.*

Since the year 2001, Cabiya has resided in the city of Santo Domingo, where he has worked as a professor, journalist, columnist, and cultural critic. He has served as a scriptwriter for research programs and also as the Executive Editor of the cultural, literary, and social studies magazine *Vértice*, published by Universidad Iberoamericana Latin American School of Social Sciences. He is currently the Head of the University’s Center for Modern Languages and Cultures and of the UNIBE Editorial.

The Novel

Trance is a 129-page novel divided into four chapters that can be read as four self-contained stories or as four parts of an over-reaching story arc. These chapters present very different stories, each one in a different genre, set in a twisted hyper-realistic version of the Rio Piedras urban area. Although the stories are different, the events and characters of each chapter intertwine with each other in surprising and often disturbing ways. It also

includes a glossary which is written as a parody of the standard glossaries that are included in other novels. This thesis is a partial translation of the novel. It consists of the glossary and the first two chapters, “Dog” and “Poet.” A summary of each of the parts of the novel is provided below.

Useful Definitions

The book begins with a small glossary that consists of four words. It gives the formal dictionary definition of each of the words, but the choice of words is unorthodox: “urine,” “electrolyte,” “blood,” and spirit. The reader is clueless as to why this glossary consists of these four words until the end of the last chapter of the novel. Afterwards the author includes two quotations: one from Manuel de Landa, a Mexican writer, and one from Roberto Angleró, a Puerto Rican singer and songwriter.

Dog

The first chapter of the novel is entitled “Dog.” It is written in first person from the perspective of a middle-aged man named Figueroa, and it takes place in a busy street of the Río Piedras urban area. The man is utterly confused throughout the chapter, since he feels sick, delirious, and weird. He can smell and hear things that he had never smelled or heard before, and has a very blurry vision. His normal body movements do not seem to

work. He feels as if he is on his knees the whole time and is astonished that no one helps him in a situation like that. While trying to make sense of the chaotic assault of the senses that he is feeling, he starts reminiscing about his life, his wife, past loves, and provides some harsh, although occasionally funny, social commentary about modern Puerto Rican society. People do not seem to notice him, and the ones that do treat him like an animal. Little by little, he starts to remember what had happened before he began to feel so sick. However, before he is able to figure out what is going on, a car runs over him, and the chapter ends. The reader knows that something is wrong with Figueroa since the beginning, but the author gives a couple of hints about what might be happening to him. Inexplicably, he has been transformed into a dog, and he died before he even knew what was happening.

This chapter contains a clear influence of Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis." In both stories, the protagonists find themselves turned into a nonhuman creature suddenly and without explanation. In both stories the protagonists are treated like the animal they have become, but in "Metamorphosis" the treatment is harsher, since Gregor's family knows it is he inside the body of the cockroach. In Figueroa's case, no one knew, not even he, that he was transformed into a dog. Both protagonists have to get used to moving and using their new bodies, and adapting to the different animalistic tastes that each one acquires as time passes in the story. Both protagonists meet a tragic end, finding death in a cold embrace, although Figueroa's death by a car is quite a bit more violent than Gregor's

self-determination of cutting his threads of life in order to rid his family of his burden.

The cause of transformation is not discussed in either of the individual stories, but while the causes of Figueroa's transformation are found in the last chapter of the novel, Kafka leaves the cause of the transformation unbeknownst to its readers. These are some of the aspects of the chapter that are influenced by Kafka, and Cabiya does not make any attempt to hide the influence.

Poet

The second chapter of the novel is entitled "Poet." It is written in first person from the perspective of a high school student named Hugo. It takes place at different points in time and in different locations of the Río Piedras urban area. It begins with Hugo narrating a summary of his middle and high school years. He starts reminiscing about his first love, the way opposite-sex friendships change when a person reaches puberty, how he took up writing poetry as a way to let out his feelings, and other adolescent introspections. He remembers how his friendship with Evelyn, his best friend, changed over the years and how he fell in love with her once they were in the ninth grade. He told that fact to Lymaris, Evelyn's best friend, and from then on Evelyn became distant from Hugo, only communicating with him through Lymaris. Once they got to senior year, they were no longer friends. As a gift for being the class valedictorian, Hugo's parents bought him a car. When he brought the car to his school, Evelyn started talking to him again and asked

him if he could give her driving classes. He gladly accepted, and one day after school, they started the lessons. Hugo noticed that the driving lesson was just an excuse for her to use the car to pick up Lymaris and their respective boyfriends. They were smoking marihuana, making out, and feeling each other up in the backseat of the car. Among all the confusion, Hugo did not pay attention to the road and ran over a dog (which is the same dog from Chapter 1.) Hugo panicked and quickly fled from the scene. While he fled from the scene, he noticed that a shady-looking car was pursuing him. He tried to outrun and evade the car, but the car caught up to him. The unknown assailant pulled out a gun and shot indiscriminately in the direction of Hugo's car. The foursome that was in the backseat received the full volley of bullets, and once the shooter was ready to kill Hugo, he looked at the terrified teenager and noticed that he had mistaken his car for someone else's. The shooter fled the scene, and Hugo was able to get out of his car to check on the others. All of them were dead except Lymaris, who was badly hurt. Hugo fell to his knees and held her in his arms. Lymaris confessed to him that he had been the love of her life, and Hugo finally saw that she was the one that always stood by him, not Evelyn. The chapter ends with Lymaris dying in Hugo's arms.

Hugo shows a high level of education, with a discourse and analysis of what he sees that is deep and profound. One can say that Hugo does not see his world, but gazes it. The "gaze" is a term that Michel Foucault uses to create an epistemological relationship between an object of observation and the knowledge of the person observing it. Foucault

uses the word to refer to the fact that it is not just the object of knowledge which is constructed, but also the knower. It is why while in the other chapter Figueroa could only see and observe what was happening to him, Hugo is able to use the gaze to gain a wider understanding of the world around him. Hugo, being a well learned and educated observer, was able to use the gaze to provide an analysis and narration of events that someone with the education level of Figueroa would not be able to do.

This approach of using the same characters to influence the plot and outcome of multiple stories, interlacing them across distinctive separate ones, could be an influence of Honoré de Balzac's *The Human Comedy*. In this multi-volume collection of inter-linked novels and stories depicting French society in the period of the Restoration and the July Monarchy, which are placed in a variety of settings, the same characters reappear in multiple stories. It is a very similar style to the one Cabiya uses in *Trance*, in which most of the characters appear in each other's chapters, and influence the outcome of the story in some profound way.

Approach to Translation

Trance as a whole poses many challenges for translation. Since it is a work of fiction, which uses four viewpoints throughout the novel, I needed to find a way to portray and personify the two viewpoints that are used in the two chapters that were translated. In the

first chapter, “Dog,” the viewpoint comes from Figueroa, a confused elderly man who grew up in the countryside of Puerto Rico. Figueroa’s narration is a stream of consciousness, uninterrupted across the whole chapter. It goes from narrating the current situations, to his opinions, flashbacks and descriptions, with few transitions in between. It is disorganized and slightly chaotic, reflecting his state of mind during the narration. There are only five breaks between paragraphs in the whole chapter, which help portray the direct link the readers have to Figueroa’s mind. Figueroa is in a dire situation that he does not understand, and in his thoughts there is a sense of urgency that is reflected in the structure of the story. I made sure the translation kept the same stream of consciousness structure, maintaining the same paragraph structure, using few transitions, and keeping the precise sentences of the original. Figueroa is in a dire situation that he does not understand, and in his thoughts there is a sense of urgency that is reflected in the narration. He also uses a very colloquial vocabulary, so the translation also had to reflect this. These two characteristics of Figueroa’s narration, the stream of consciousness and the colloquialism, are in contrast with the narration style of Hugo. Hugo is the narrator of the second chapter, a cultured, love-struck high school valedictorian. Since he tells part of the story in retrospection, his narration style is long-winded, reflective, and descriptive. The sense of urgency that exists in Figueroa’s story is not present in this chapter. Even when Hugo’s life is in danger, he still takes the time to describe every single detail of the tragedy that is happening around him. His vocabulary is sophisticated and refined. Therefore, I had to take all of this into account in the translation, since the English text

still had to have the distinct characteristics and structure of each of the narrators, also imitating the vocabulary that each of them used. Since Hugo uses a more refined vocabulary in a high register, the words are not as colloquial as those of Figueroa. Hugo also does not use any curse words during the whole chapter, while Figueroa uses quite a few of them. Some of these words presented a couple of translation problems, since they did not have a direct translation into English. The first of such words that appears in the text is *coño*, which is itself a word that has many meanings in Spanish. In some countries, it is a very vulgar word, which refers to the female genitalia, but in the case of Puerto Rico and in the novel, this word is used as an interjection, to express exasperation and frustration. English has some interjections that can fulfill this function, but since *coño* does not quite reach a vulgar status in Puerto Rico, I could not use a vulgar word in English. “Damn” is an interjection that expresses the same feelings as *coño*, but is not as vulgar an interjection as “shit.” This is the reason why I translated *coño* as “damn.”

Another curse that does not have a direct translation into English is *la madre que lo parió*. In English this literally means “the mother who bore you,” which is not a curse that makes too much sense. Since this is an insult directed towards both a person and the mother of the same person, I had two insults in English that could be possible translations: “son of a bitch” and “motherfucker.” I cannot use “son of a bitch” since in another section of the text we find the curse *hijo de puta*, which is usually translated as “son of a bitch.” That left me with the other choice, which is a bit more vulgar than the Spanish insult, but “motherfucker” is another English curse that carries the mother name.

This is why I settled on this translation. There are other curse words in Figueroa's chapter, such as *mierda*, *carajo*, and *jodido*, but all of those have a direct translation in English, so they did not give me any problems in the translation. Hugo's chapter is almost free of curse words, but one of them stuck out as a potential problem, which was *te cojieron de pendejo*. It is a vulgar insult in Spanish that in English means that you were scammed or that someone made a fool out of you. The problem is that I could not find any curse word vulgar enough to match the vulgarity in Spanish, so I had to make compromise and settle for a less vulgar one. I translated it as "they made a fool out of you", which carries the same meaning as the original Spanish insult, only with less vulgarity. There is one more curse word in the Hugo chapter, but it was *mierda*, which has a simple and direct translation into English. Overall, the curse words were less problematic than I initially expected, since most of them had a direct translation into English, and for the ones that did not, I believe I was able to translate them with terms that maintain the meaning and function that they had in Spanish.

One linguistic element that unfortunately was lost in the translation is the use of Spanglish. Some of the words that both narrators use in English are *hot dog*, *thinner*, *men*, and *braces*. I had to leave these words just as they were in the original text, since there is no way to replicate Spanglish in the English translation. If I translated those words into Spanish and inserted them in the English translation it would not make much sense, since Spanglish in Puerto Rico happens by taking English words and inserting

them into Spanish, not vice-versa. In order to let the reader know that these words were used in English in the original Spanish text, I have formatted them in bold. This way there is a stylistic differentiation in these words, even if a semantic one cannot be achieved do to the lack of reciprocity in the use of Spanglish.

Cultural knowledge of Puerto Rico is required in order to understand some references that the author makes during the novel. Puerto Ricans would have no trouble understanding them, since they possess this information just by living on the island, but a foreigner reading the translation might have some trouble understanding these references without any help. I added a couple of keywords in the translation to help them understand these references. In the first chapter, Figueroa is talking at one point about *los estudiantes de la Colombia*. This “Colombia” refers to a school that has that name, but to a foreigner, this could cause a great deal of confusion, since he might think of Columbia the country, and believe the narrator is talking about Colombian students, not students from a school that has the name Colombia. Therefore, I translated that segment as “the students from Colombia School,” to let the reader know that the students belong to a school of that name, not to the country. Another case where I provided a keyword is in that same chapter when Figueroa says *Ya me imagino los titulares de El Vocero*. *El Vocero* is a Puerto Rican newspaper that is known for violent and sensationalist headlines. I could have translated that as “I can already imagine the headlines of *El Vocero*,” and the word “headline” would give the reader a clue that *El Vocero* is some kind of news-related

media. Unfortunately, just this word is not enough to let the reader know it is a newspaper, since headlines can also apply to television news. I added the word “newspaper” after *El Vocero* to make it clear that it belongs to the written and not to audiovisual media. One more case in which I added a keyword is when Figueroa mentions a Chinese restaurant when he says, *No me importa, no me puedo dejar morir sentado en una cuneta al frente de un Star Cream*. Star Cream is a chain of Chinese restaurants in Puerto Rico, but the foreign reader has no way of knowing that. I translated that sentence, but at the end added the word “restaurant,” to let the reader know what exactly a Star Cream is.

In the end, it was a great challenge to translate a literary text that is steeped in Puerto Rican culture. The differing narration viewpoints combined with the use of Puerto Rican general knowledge, regionalisms, colloquialisms, and sayings were things that made this translation an arduous one. I attempted to bring into the English language the first two chapters of *Trance*, and even though there were some compromises in the translation, I believe that it is an adequate representation of the original text.

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