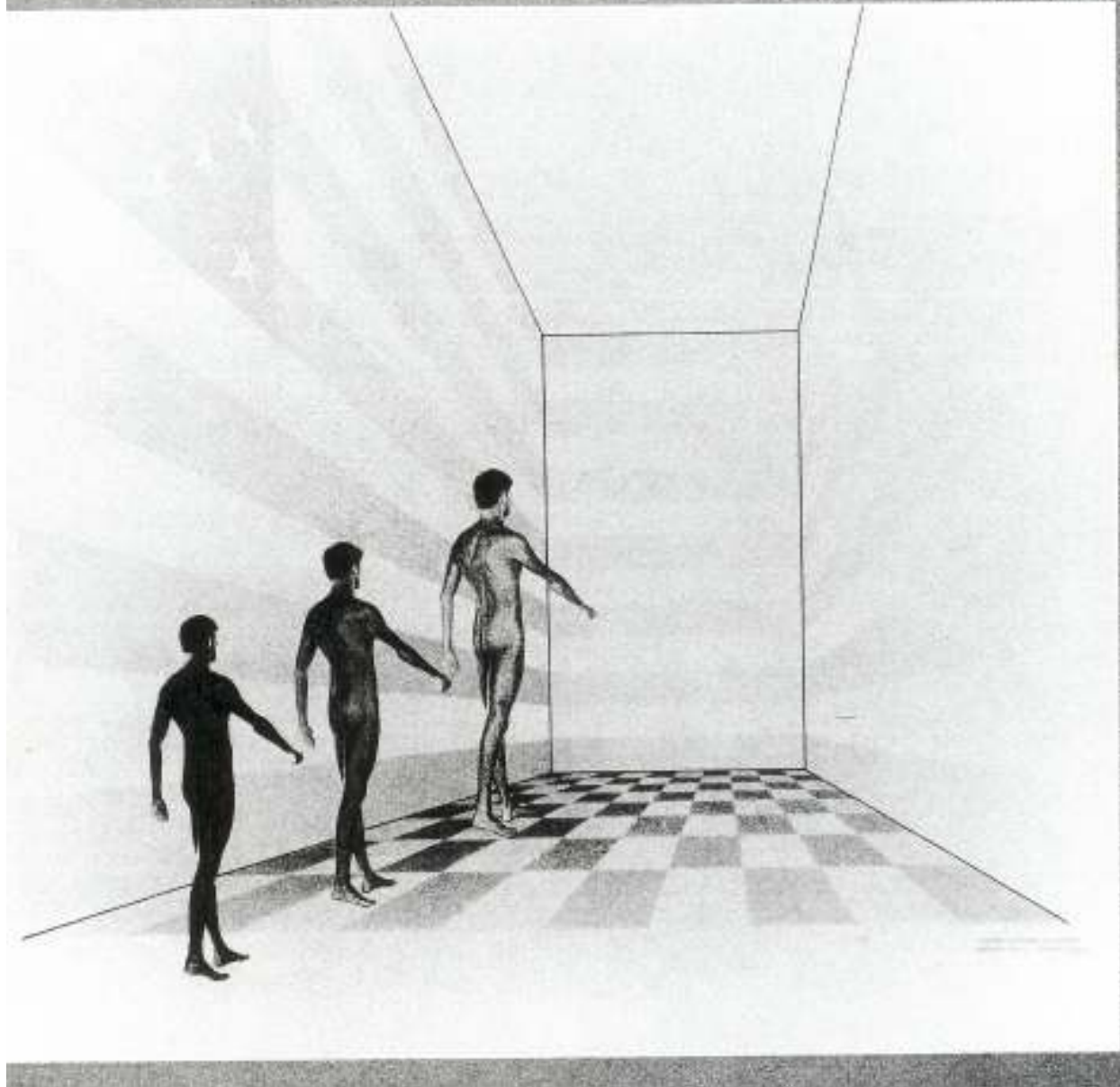


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THE TRANSLATOR AS TAMER: THE CASE OF NORA STREJILEVICH'S *UNA SOLA MUERTE NUMEROSA*

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I think it is safe to say that most literary translators would heartily agree with Lawrence Venuti's assertion that "all translation is domestication,"¹ implying that the endeavor demands patience (not to say stubbornness), talent, and especially daring. Such a formulation speaks a cage of wild beasts, of bucking horses in rodeos, giving a certain dangerous and heroic patina to our much unsung (present company excepted) calling: the art/task of translation.² This apt and not at all gratuitous metaphor can be appreciated by anyone who has ever repeated a simple word several times, only to have it somehow take on a life of its own, revealing its mysterious dimensions just on the basis of repetition. This is infinitely more so with a text, even a superficially straightforward one, when put to the scrutiny of a close reading, let alone to the total transformation of translation. The depth of interconnections, the intricacy of resonances, the ferocious independence of an original can be daunting, if not downright overwhelming. Enter the literary translator cum tamer!

In this essay I propose to extend the metaphor and explore the wild ride of bringing *Una sola muerte numerosa*, Argentine writer Nora Strejilevich's award-winning novel (1997, Letras de Oro Prize for Fiction), from Spanish into English. A good part of the wildness derives from a basic misunderstanding. When I decided to take on the project I assumed I would be translating a book. As the work progressed, however, it became ever more intense and personal until I felt that I had the author's life in my hands while she stood by watching me tangle with her novel/life, bending and distorting it into an unfamiliar shape, into strange sounds. And needless to say, a life is much less subject to taming than a text! As such, the process demanded even more care than usual, ever more patience, and no small amount of daring. The reasons for this situation were threefold: (1) the genre of the text: testimonial historical autobiography, where the author's voice is ever present; (2) the traumatic nature of the events described; and (3) my close relationship with the author, which was

immensely helpful yet, at the same time, made the process more intimate and thus more difficult. In this sense, *Una sola muerte numerosa* proved indeed to be a beast, and one I felt most passionate about taming.

A bit of background is in order. *Una sola muerte numerosa* is a tale about human cruelty and resilience, focusing on the period of the military junta in the Argentina of the 1970s. Strejilevich, one of the most gifted writers of what is informally known as the dictatorship generation, was herself one of the "disappeared" (persons kidnapped and illegally held by unofficial government forces) as well as one of only eight survivors (out of 5,000 prisoners) of the so-called Athletic Club death camp.³ The novel is divided into three parts. A long first part detailing the brutality of the regime, including the author's own harrowing ordeal, is interspersed with dreamily evoked fragments from her childhood and early family life that emerge as if out of a haze. This juxtaposition makes for a stark contrast, highlighting the innocence of the victims, the destructive senselessness of violence. Other narrative elements go back further in time as Strejilevich chronicles her Jewish ancestors' emigration from Eastern Europe to the New World and their hopes for a better life of freedom and opportunity. This is another of the book's main threads, a more distanced if no less poignant backdrop to contemporary events, which gives yet another dimension to the persecution her family experiences. The implications are clear: the events depicted are not merely instances of weeding out (suspected and/or imagined) "agitators" from the social fabric but also a reenacting of age-old prejudices, a chance to settle ancient or personal scores. A medium-length second part follows the author/protagonist in exile as she wanders from country to country in search of a place to rebuild her shattered life. The short third and final part narrates a return trip to Argentina. Strejilevich's novel is one of the most significant fictionalized narratives of those times, encompassing the before-during-and-after as well as multiple perspectives on the events in ques-

tion. Although there are other novels and many documents depicting that dark era in Argentine history (among them quite a few films), I know of no others that present such a complete picture. Published at a 20-year distance from the events, *Una sola muerte numerosa* has the depth of historical perspective and the breadth of the many voices it captures. The novel is not exclusively political in theme, even though it addresses three crucial issues of our time: abuses of power, hate crimes, and exile. Rather, it presents, in very human terms, the cost and long-term consequences of a government's action both for individuals and for the country.

Una sola muerte numerosa is a courageous act of self-affirmation, of faith in the healing power of words, in truth as salvation from bitterness. It is also a necessary and redemptive act of remembrance. Strejilevich makes a supreme effort to reach a blameless understanding of the situation that brings human beings, citizens of the same country at that, to treat their fellow citizens in such brutal ways. She goes so far as to give even the military a voice, something the victims were always denied. Although this approach opens the way for a national reconciliation without forgetfulness, the author also leaves no doubt that this episode should not "disappear" from national and international consciousness. "*Para que no haya olvido*! So that there be no forgetting," as Pablo Neruda put it with reference to another national/fraternal conflagration, the Spanish Civil War. It is important to note that *Una sola muerte numerosa*, which appeared in Spanish in the United States, has not been published in Argentina to date. The author has explored every possibility, repeatedly submitting the manuscript to publishers in her country, but all have turned it down, giving all sorts of legitimate-sounding excuses. The fact is that these episodes remain unmentionable in Argentina, shrouded in silence much as the Holocaust was in Germany for many years, or the Vichy period in France. So the novel is written not only against the official version of events but also, and more painfully, against a generalized will to forget.

Strejilevich's achievements in this novel are many, and they should earn her a place among such classics on the same theme as Victor Frankl's seminal work *Man's Search for Meaning* or Anne Frank's diary. That is to say, from the first lines describing her kidnapping, *Una sola muerte numerosa* is a captivating work that makes evident the ways in which the

spirit can prevail, and even triumph, through and over numbing adversity. The author manages to achieve a masterful balancing of many voices and genres, as well as an exemplary fusion of the political and the poetic, the public and the personal. The novel is told from a poetic distance that in no way cushions the impact of the tale but rather it magnifies it. Strejilevich's terse and lyrical style, her intensely luminous language, the highly controlled range of vocabulary, successfully avoid any sentimentality while projecting the individual experience onto a universal plane and tying the individual experience to the collective consciousness.

Another contemporary Argentine writer, Mariló Canoso, had this to say of Strejilevich's novel:

[it] transcends the autobiographical genre. It is a weave of voices that give testimony to the horror of a period that divided Argentina for all time into a before and an after. Nora Strejilevich writes from that after in a steady voice that often takes poetic flight, oxygenating the text, which remains strongly documentary and narrative. She reconstructs with her own voice, and with that of others who lent them to her, moments spent in that detention center, an ominously dark and terror-filled space. She reconstructs her family's history in fragments that allow some relief to the reader, even though they represent the counterpoint to that pain.⁷

Octavio Paz has called translation the art of "shadows and echoes."⁸ This was a translation of a manuscript itself composed mainly of shadows and echoes, a veritable patchwork quilt of scenes that structurally reflect the fragments of so many shattered lives; a beast not only wild but elusive as well. As the original title in Spanish indicates, the novel alternates between the individual and the group, much like an oratorio in which one person at a time steps up out of a chorus to be heard, to give personal testimony of his or her experiences, thus bringing into relief the depths of suffering that distinguished that period. In *Una sola muerte numerosa*, then, we hear the author's words speaking for herself and for her family, and also those of many other victims. In this way, the novel rescues their names and their lives from the purposeful oblivion of all desaparecidos.⁹

Now for the translation itself. I previously

worked on two novels (Rosa Montero's *Absent Love* and Carme Riera's *Mirror Images*), collaborating actively with the authors, who gave me broad powers to render the text in as close a version as possible without having to be strictly literal. In fact, with Carme Riera's, I worked from two different versions of the novel: the original Catalan (*Joc de miralls*) and the Spanish translation (*Por persona interpuesta*) done by the author herself. When I inquired which to use, since there were marked variations between them, she left it up to me to pick and choose what I preferred. This resulted in a sort of creative bridge, a passage between the two texts, which came together in the English version. Both authors, although thrilled to be translated into English for the first time, were fairly removed from their texts: Rosa Montero because she was eager to break free from the specter of her hugely successful first novel; Carme Riera because the manuscript had been published only after languishing in a desk drawer for a decade. Montero, who has a good command of English, read the final draft and gave her blessings with but a few minimal changes. Riera abstained, because her English was not adequate for her to have an opinion.

So both of my previous translations had been fairly free-flowing. Neither dealt with closely autobiographical or life-changing experiences of the magnitude portrayed in *Una sola muerte numerosa*, which made this project a different proposition altogether. From the beginning, Nora (I use her first name advisedly, to indicate the degree of closeness that developed as we worked through the text) and I worked together, "closelaborating," to use Suzanne Jill Levine's very apt term, and, as it soon became clear, with precious little room to move. Every word was dear to her heart because it was all she had left after the debacle, the shreds of her previous life that she had carefully nurtured, carrying them around for two decades as she tried to give them shape and meaning by turning them into fiction.⁸ Each small deviation, every little nuance resulted in endless debate. Our relation was unbalanced because I knew all sorts of intimate things about her life, while she knew near to nothing about mine. This was a source of a certain awkwardness. Who, then, was this stranger to whom she had handed her book, her life?

It must also be taken into account that I was, perhaps, not the ideal translator for the book: I was not Argentine and, although familiar with the historical events that the book portrayed, I had only read about

them at a safe distance. The language and expressions Strejilevich uses are intimately tied to a historical period and context that were common currency in Argentina, but I often needed clarification of subtle contemporary references clear to any native, of that double-speak characteristic of repressive societies, and of local usage: (ie. *cana* = not "white hair" as in formal Spanish, but "police"). It was obvious I had a lot to learn. But then is that not precisely one of the main joys of translating, learning about the many aspects that combine to form the universe of the text? I decided the only thing to do was to try and turn this handicap into an advantage for, if I did not understand something, how was the average American reader supposed to? In other words, aspects that an Argentine translator might have taken for granted were revealed as problems for me (and therefore, for the target audience). Needless to say, I had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of questions—not only about the vagaries of Argentine seventies slang⁹—that she answered with extraordinary patience. Whenever I despaired, I would recall García Márquez' comment when he was asked why his book *Noticia de un secuestro* had come out simultaneously in most European languages, except German. Apparently the German translators had an inexhaustible supply of questions. "Now *that* is translating," the Nobel laureate stated.¹⁰

Still, how was I to make the text intelligible without footnotes (anathema to a translator of fiction)? Where to draw the line between explaining and staying within the impressionistic and poetic nature of the book? How to not betray? Counting on the author's assistance was not only a boon, it was crucial in this case. At first Strejilevich wanted no concessions to the cultural handicaps of her intended readership (i.e., adding a phrase to clarify who Carlos Gardel was), but later it was agreed to include a brief glossary and an introduction, greatly simplifying my own task. Nora knows English and was ever helpful in lending her educated ear to the nuances of the work, helping me to toe the line, so to speak, to maintain the distanced proximity of the original, to leave in the craziness, not to tidy up too much (for instance, there is a centipede with forty pairs of legs that I thought should be changed to fifty). I had to proceed in minute steps, pondering each expression, every word against a complex, and often unfamiliar, set of variables. For example, take the dates. I had originally used the more Hispanic 7 March 1977 vs. March 7,

1977. At some point I had to switch them all to the latter format, because the military expressed it in the former way and Strojilevich wanted to keep the distinction between “them” and “us” even when the details meant nothing to the reader. One thing I was sure would be well served by the English version, lacking gender markers, was the individual anonymity of all those other silenced voices that find expression in the text. So I approached it with the optimist’s glee, thinking that the effect of anonymity/shadows would be even more powerful in the target language. And, indeed, it proved so successful that at times the text was totally bewildering. In other words, in translation it was even more difficult to follow the already fragmented story line. For the chorus of secondary voices to remain unmarked yet be intelligible (the story of the kidnapping and murder of her cousins Abel & Hugo, for example), some words of clarification were unavoidable.

The structural principles of the novel are elementary: a constant play between foreground and background, a patchwork quilt of scenes connected by repetition (of action: kidnapping and torture; of feelings: despair; of expressions: words that serve to tie different episodes in the act of remembering and signal a shift in context that help us cross to the other side of the mirror where nightmares dwell). This latter, though seemingly simple, device presented immediate problems because many of the words used in Spanish often did not work in English. For instance, the author used the word “juicio” to play with its two meanings of opinion and wisdom (teeth) for tying two sections together. There was no way around this. So, in order to compensate for the links that we inevitably lost, some links were added where there had originally been none. Sometimes it was as easy as just repeating the name of the city (Buenos Aires), or inserting an adverb (plaintively) to connect the sections. There were some unexpected successes, as when parts one and two came together in one image: dreamscape. (The first part ends with a view of Argentina from the plane “un territorio que imagino,” and part two fortuitously starts with a dream sequence.) Other things just fell into place nicely, for instance, expanding on the mention of the Beatles, the title of one of their songs served as a chapter heading (*Let it be*—which happened to also be a close translation of the original heading: *Que pase lo que tenga que pasar*). Some other references were fully exploited to achieve the densely woven texture

of the original. For instance, the quote that gave the book its original title, and that appears at the beginning and end of the text uses the word “transfigurar.” However, “transfigure” in English has religious connotations of a positive sort (Christ becoming transfigured as He ascends to heaven). It was decided instead to capitalize on the several allusions to Kafka in the text and convey that as “metamorphosed,” which connotes a negative sort of transformation, much as it does in Ovid.

There were other aspects that required careful taming:

1. Rhythm: Unlike Borges,¹¹ the author felt a special aversion to English’s short and clipped words, particularly when strung out in a sentence, to the extent that they often broke the poetic flow of the text, its sound patterns. Yet we also did not want to use longer words that would obstruct the simple, concrete tone that characterizes Nora’s style. A lot of the revisions consisted of simply finding melodious alternatives. Example: That they were going to use me for soap > that I was good for soap.

2. Font: How to orient the reader by clearly differentiating the various sources, which appear somewhat jumbled in the Spanish original. It was decided to use italics only for oral testimonies as well as songs/nursery rhymes/chants, and indented regular script for all the written references.

3. Registers: In a translation, usually the first chapter is the hardest because it takes some doing to capture the tone. In this instance, almost every section demanded a change, represented a new start, because there was a dizzying variety as a result of the many sources used: oral testimony, legal documents, newspapers, books, songs, poems, chants, speeches, TV ad campaigns; plus the different tones of victims/families and torturers (including police, various branches of the military, and politicians), which differed among themselves and from the author’s own voice.

4. Time-frames: What to do with the verb tenses? In Spanish, Strojilevich uses mostly the historical present, which gives tremendous immediacy to the narrative. In English, however, it soon begins to feel stilted, which is not at all the way her book sounds. So there were more decisions to be made:

a. The remote past of the Jewish migration was conveyed in past tenses.

b. The more recent childhood scenes, along with the events that destroyed that innocent world, were kept in the present to heighten the dramatic juxtapo-

sition.

5. a. Nursery rhymes: Evoking the world of trust that is violated during this period. We looked for English equivalents. At first, "Mary had a little lamb" came to mind for the implicit reference to sacrificial victims, but Nora felt it was too sweet and common and chose the more violent "Step on a crack, break your mother's back" to translate "Pisa pisueta color de ciruela..."

b. Songs: It was decided to translate the tangos rather than look for equivalent American tunes that would be out of context. Altogether, the strategy was to bring the readers to Argentina as much as possible, rather than the text to the United States, which, given the theme, would render it disconcerting if not altogether incomprehensible. This was, again, unlike my other translations, because their themes, feminism (Montero's novel) or political intrigue (Riera's), were readily transportable to an American environment.

6. Corrections: The text needed very careful reading because there were some things in it that needed correcting. For instance, a Christmas letter is dated in the spring; the number sequence reading 40, 50, 51 became 49, 50, 51; some chapter headings were in the wrong place (*Desaparecidos pero no del todo*), etc.

7. Miscellaneous examples:

a. A reference to Third World priests (is Argentina not Third World itself to American readers?). It was translated for meaning, > i.e., liberation theologians.

b. What to call clandestine prisons? Concentration camps are too Nazi; prison camps more long term. Finally we chose not to mince words, and used death camps, which is what they really were.

c. The (if I may so call it) touchy dimension of endearments: *mi negrita* (referring to her friend Patricia) is not racial but playful, meaning wicked, naughty.

8. And of course, the title! The literal rendering, *A Single Numerous Death*, seemed awkward. But where to go from there? One thing was nonnegotiable: the word death must remain. We played endlessly with new formulations: *Deathscape?* (reminiscent of the internet access program). *Deathwatch?* (echoes of the TV program). *Death Run Rampant?* (the words of one of the military leaders). And finally decided to go back to the original but with a slight change: *A Single Numberless Death*, which seemed

appropriately richer for the double meaning of the word "numberless."

Strejilevich sometimes expressed her sense that linguistically, the English was far richer and more varied than the Spanish, where she purposefully limited herself to a highly controlled repetitive litany. That is, perhaps, due to the different nature of the two languages, to the wider reach of English, and also to the fact that two words infrequently have the same several meanings in both languages (i.e., "juicio" as mentioned before). As a writer, she sought startling ways of expressing her feelings, of describing situations, which, as a translator, I had to duplicate, staying at that level, straining English syntax to keep the directness of the original Spanish, its always concrete references, its silences.

Let us also keep in mind the struggle of the author with this chance to rewrite her own work into a more "evolved" version, as Borges suggested is the case with translation. (Remember how many of Velázquez' paintings showed signs of his having tinkered with them because he had them all on display at the royal palace throughout his life?) Strejilevich constantly debated whether or what to add or omit, what formulations might work better for an English-speaking audience, etc. She was both reliving and rewriting the whole thing once again, which made for a constantly shifting, very fluid text. There was yet one more complicating factor: the fact that parts of the novel had been first published compressed and restructured into a short story. Not to mention the pressure of a prize-winning original demanding a prize-level translation!

For all the above reasons, the process proved a profoundly challenging and at times frustrating task, and proportionately all the more rewarding. Altogether an emotionally draining if enormously enriching experience. Still, the question of legitimacy recently raised by Isabelle Van Der Schelden in her incisive essay "Authority in Translation: Collaborating with the Author" remains:

Translation collaboration encourages translators to hide behind authorial approval...[since] translators feel the constant need to defend and justify themselves because they hold a different status [from that of the author] and are not judged by the same criteria. They have the difficult role of attempting to be faithful to the source text and to the target language, as well as gaining approval of

author, critics, and target-language readers.¹¹²

I frequently felt pulled in several different directions at once, having to satisfy diverse masters (including the editor and a vector of the manuscript) and facing less than satisfactory trade-offs. A not unimportant factor in the process was the new ease of communication through e-mail, which allowed instant access as well as instant reaction to the evolving versions of the translation. Perhaps I can be faulted for surrendering control of the text to a great extent, for sharing and perhaps compromising my "authority." However, it was very much a conscious if sometimes agonizing decision. Every text is its own universe, and therefore, each translation must reflect it and be guided by its inner necessities. This was one case in which yielding to the author's preferences was, I believe, very much in order. I did retain final veto power over the decisions, and so the responsibility for any flaws with the English text is my own. In the end, I can only hope that the beast was tamed enough to have it do what I wished it to without diminishing any of its wildness in the process...which is, perhaps, the greatest loss in translation.

Notes

1. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 21.
2. Hemingway is said to have told an aspiring Cuban poet that if he wished to write poetry, he should practice by fighting bulls, fishing for marlin, and hunting for lions. In César Leante's *Hemingway y la revolución cubana*, Madrid: Pliegos, 1992.
3. One of the five large camps that served as cornerstones for the military repression. The Club Atlético was located near the presidential palace and its official name was Central Antisubversiva. Its initials, CA, gave rise to the name by which it was commonly known.
4. Pablo Neruda, *España en el corazón*.
5. Marily Canoso, written for the back cover of the first edition of the novel.
6. Octavio Paz, quoted in Edwin Honig's *The Poet's Other Voice: Conversations on Literary Translation*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986, p. 155.
7. Strojilovich has spent the last few years working to put together an archive of testimonials for the University of Virginia.
8. For instance, at the end of the novel she addresses her brother, another victim of the regime, directly: "I came back, Gerardo, to tie up the loose ends of our story into a knot that might undo the uncertainty. To recover a version of the events that could be pieced together and understood and believed. To free myself from the compulsion of inventing possible endings, endless possibilities."
9. What, for instance, were the accepted English names for the many organizations mentioned in the book? The recently published *The Lexicon of Terror*, by Marguerite Feitlowitz (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), was invaluable for that purpose.
10. Gabriel García Márquez, interview in Spain's newspaper *El País*, May, 1996.
11. Isabelle Van Der Schelden. "Authority in Literary Translation: Collaborating with the Author," *Translation Review*, 56, 1998, p. 23.
12. Van Der Schelden, *ibid.*, p. 29.

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