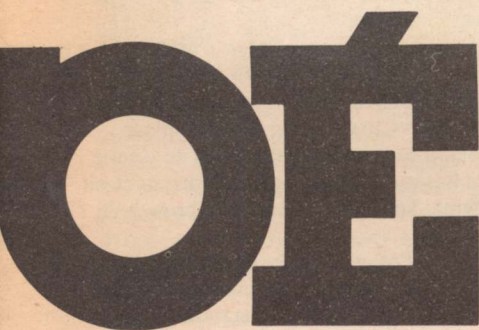


Brazil

political debate, on the TV Record channel.
'It began as a chance to hold debates

**'It's part of the task
of journalism to defend
society's interests by
keeping checks on power'**

between the supporters of Tancredo Neves,
the opposition presidential candidate, and
those of Paulo Maluf, the official candidate



[for the indirect elections of 1985]. After Neves won, the programme continued, but Carta's irreverent style did not go down too well with members of the new government, formed under President Sarney when Neves died. In 1987 the Finance Minister, Dilson Funaro, resigned under pressure. Carta quickly arranged an interview with his closest adviser, Luis Gonzaga Belluzo, who talked about the 'court' surrounding the President. The tape was requisitioned by the government's telecommunications department and once again time began to run out for Mino Carta. He had already got his next interview in the bag, with opposition politician and ex-governor Leonel Brizola, but was told by the director of the TV station 'They're closing in on me, they're trying to scare me'. The interview went out at 2 a.m. instead of its usual early evening slot. Carta resigned.

He remains philosophical. 'Indirect censorship is part of the game. The censorship of the military regime was much worse, it involved journalists being persecuted, arrested, even killed. The real problem is lack of respect for the profession'. Pessimistic, sceptical, wishing he had stayed in Italy, Mino Carta still insists on carrying out the task he's chosen for himself, trying to enlighten Brazil's 'primitive' élite, in the hope that change will come one day and the unrepresented masses take their place at the table. ■

Jan Rocha works as a correspondent for The Guardian and the BBC in São Paulo.

Paulo Freire

Transforming reality

One of the key figures in the Popular Culture Movement, Paulo Freire is the founder of a revolutionary educational method which brought literacy — and political awareness — to thousands of the poor in Brazil. His books, which have played a key role in adult literacy movements throughout the world, have been banned by many dictatorial governments, including those of South Africa and, most recently, Haiti. Forced into exile from his own country following the right-wing coup in 1964, Freire finally returned in 1980. In São Paulo he talked to Vivian Schelling about his work

Paulo Freire's work became widely known in the early 1960s, a period of social reform, widespread political mobilisation and above all great cultural effervescence in Brazil. Perhaps for the first time in Brazilian history, 'the people' — urban workers, the peasantry and sectors of the middle classes — were beginning to play an important part in shaping the political future of their country.

This expressed itself in various interrelated ways. Development policies, designed to transform Brazil into an independent industrialised nation, were implemented. Newly-formed trade unions and political organisations began demanding the democratisation of Brazil's authoritarian social and political institutions. At the cultural level, Popular Culture Movements spread throughout Brazil, organising grassroots education centres and promoting artistic forms aimed at overcoming Brazil's cultural colonialism.

Particularly in the rural areas in the Northeast of Brazil, the political awakening of the peasantry posed a serious threat to the age-old system of land tenure, whereby the concentration of land in the hands of a few powerful families condemned the landless rural population to abject poverty. The formation of Peasant Leagues and Rural Trade Unions and above all the new critical spirit fostered by the Popular Culture Movements gradually transformed the Northeast of Brazil, and in particular Pernambuco, Freire's home state, into a place of unprecedented political and cultural creativity. Adult literacy programmes, political organisation and the promotion of popular arts and folklore went hand in hand.

Paulo Freire, whose experience as a social worker had brought him into close contact with the material deprivation and spiritual oppression suffered by the rural population, became one of the main figures in the Popular Culture Movement. Discussion

groups or 'culture circles' were organised. With the help of slides representing the problematic situations of their everyday lives, rural workers were led to reflect on the causes of their misery and thus to overcome their uncritical acceptance of their oppression. On the basis of this experience of collective consciousness-raising, or conscientização, Paulo Freire gradually developed a revolutionary adult literacy method, in which the literacy process was linked to the critical analysis of the social and political realities to which the learner's personal use of language referred. Freire's method was based not on a ready-made text, whose contents might be quite unrelated to the learner's needs or experience, but on teaching people to read and write words such as 'bread', 'struggle', 'people', and enabling them, in Freire's words, to 'unveil' reality — that is, to gain a liberating insight into how and why their experience of deprivation and oppression was socially generated. Such insight would in turn enable them to emerge from 'the culture of silence', to acquire a 'voice', and thus to become agents in the development of a just and humane society.

The method proved very successful, and in 1963 the first National Literacy Campaign was organised. Since only literate citizens were legally allowed to vote, it was essential for the current government to gain support for its social reforms by teaching as many people as possible to read and write. 'Culture Circles' using Freire's method were to be extended throughout Brazil. But because of the growth of political awareness which this literacy method generated, Freire's thinking and the activities of the Popular Culture Movements were seen as a threat by the upholders of the established social order, in particular the landowning classes of Brazil.

With the right-wing military coup in 1964, the process of political mobilisation was cut short. The Peasant League and rural trade

Brazil Transforming reality

unions were disbanded; leaders and participants of the Popular Culture Movement were persecuted and tortured. The adult literacy material was confiscated or destroyed and Freire fled to Chile, where Eduardo Frei's Christian Democratic government was in power. In exile and with the hindsight of the military coup in Brazil, Freire's thinking went through a process of radicalisation. Contained in a slim volume, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire's reflections on the relationship between education, social revolution and human liberation became an inspiration to social and revolutionary movements in many different parts of the world, from the student movements in Europe in the 1960s and 70s to the national liberation movements in Africa and Central America. In Guinea Bissau and in Nicaragua Freire's method has been implemented in national literacy campaigns.

With the overthrow of Allende's government, Freire was forced into exile in Switzerland where he worked with the World Council of Churches until his return to Brazil in 1980.

Vivian Schelling

Vivian Schelling: In your work you discuss various important themes relating to culture and politics. You analyse the relationship between language and power, you develop a theory of education as a dialogue. Above all,

though, it seems to me that the concept of a pedagogy of the oppressed is of fundamental importance in understanding your work.

Paulo Freire: Your question takes me back about thirty years to a time when I had not yet perceived the political nature of education. It took me a long time to realise that education was not only an ethical and aesthetic practice but a political act, a dialogue, an act of creating awareness.

At a certain point, when I was in exile in Chile in the 1960s, I began to review what I and others had done in my original context — in Brazil. I arrived in this new context at a moment of intense political interest, when the Christian Democrats had just won power. This enabled me, through the analysis of what I had achieved in Brazil and through my attempt to understand what was happening in Chile, to begin to see the obvious, namely, the political nature of education. This does not mean that my earlier work in Brazil had not been political; on the contrary, it had been eminently so. But I knew this only theoretically; I had not yet assumed responsibility for it. In Chile, this awareness exploded in my consciousness, and I was forced to conclude that a neutral education is impossible. Education always serves a certain political dream, an established political power, a particular set of class

interests.

So I had to accept that education either serves the dominant ideology or opposes it. At the same time, I realised that what I had called a liberating education could not on its own become the engine of social transformation. Education is subject to economic, political and ideological limits. But it is precisely because of this that it is effective. The task that faces the educator as politician is to see what can be done by and through education, and at what point it can be achieved in the general political struggle to transform reality. During my exile in Chile, where I reflected seriously on my previous experience, this task became clear to me and I wrote *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

The book does not provide a model, a recipe, a universal proposition. It needs to be reinvented anew in whatever context it is used. But — having acquired, like most books, a certain autonomy from its author — it has today been translated into eighteen different languages and spread throughout the world.

In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I tried to analyse the specific circumstances which generate particular interpretations of reality by the oppressed as a collective body, a social class. Today the book still represents a challenge to the reader, and I would like to add that it has been a source of great joy

The battle of the school texts

An article in *Le Monde* on the schooling situation in parts of rural Nicaragua, written before the official ceasefire in that country, offers an illuminating example of how Paulo Freire's theories are tested in reality:

The anti-Sandinista guerrillas see it as a great victory: in certain areas they have managed to replace school textbooks praising the revolution with others bought abroad. In the South, on either side of the strategic route linking the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Contras have changed the educational landscape by forcing the Ministry of Education to hand over responsibility for primary education to the Catholic Church. For many Nicaraguan peasant children in this region, morning prayers are regaining the place they lost in recent years to revolutionary slogans that had to be chanted every day on arrival at school.

In Zelaya department, three US nuns have played an important role in this transformation of primary schooling. 'In the 1970s,' Sister Ines explains, 'we set up 80

schools in the parishes of Muelle de los Bueyes and Rama. After the revolution, the new government took them over, and appointed their own teachers. Recently, pressure from the Contras has convinced the government that it would be better for security reasons to return to the old system and, since 1986, we are again in charge of the 80 schools. We are back where we were 15 years ago.'

None of the schools is accessible by road. They are all in mountainous areas more or less controlled by the Contras, though the latter are often pursued by the Sandinista army and have been unable to set up fixed camps. 'The Contras came and inspected our school texts and gave their approval,' Sister Ines adds. 'The teachers don't deal with Nicaraguan history any more, as this could be dangerous for them.'

The nuns buy the books from a bookstore in San José, the capital of Costa Rica, using the 200 dollars a month they are sent from their Franciscan community in Wisconsin.

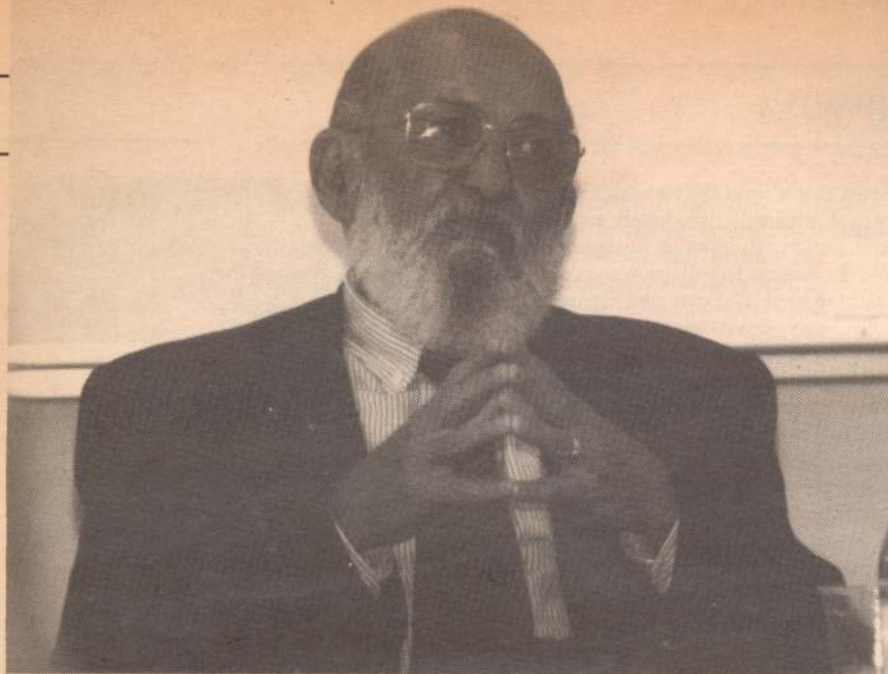
In accepting this change in textbooks in war zones the Sandinistas 'have demonstrated [their] flexibility and realism', according to Father Fernando Cardenal, the Minister of Education. But the revolutionary Carlitos primary textbooks are obligatory in the rest of the country. These represent 'an

enormous effort on our part to affirm our cultural independence', Father Cardenal asserts. He admits that they include some mistakes committed in 'the euphoria of victory after 50 years of dictatorship', but insists: 'It was normal that General Sandino and Carlos Fonseca, the heroes of our revolution, should have pride of place. Previous schoolbooks gave only four lines to Sandino's glorious exploits, and presented him as a highwayman. Under Somoza's dictatorship, our history was written by the enemies of the people.'

Maria Lina Aragon has kept all the different books in the cupboard of her primary school at Mantales Verdes. She brought out the manuals from the three periods: the dog-eared Somoza ones; the austere Sandinista government texts; and the new, brightly-coloured books that have been printed in Costa Rica, Colombia, Panama, or Spain. The barefoot children leaf through them without noticing any difference. They do not seem to understand the meaning of the slogan in the third grade Carlitos book: 'Culture is the artistic weapon of the revolution'; or the references to 'Nicaraguan traitors' who do not respect the revolutionary symbols: the red and black national flag, and the Sandinista anthem. ■

B. de la Grange

Brazil



Paulo Freire, revolutionary educator

to me and never a source of vanity. It has also awakened in me a sense of responsibility, because of the accounts I have heard of young revolutionaries from Nicaragua, Central America, Asia and Africa, who have suffered and been tortured, killed and imprisoned as a result of their acquaintance with this book.

Could you say something more about your view of the relationship between education and revolution?

I would like to repeat that, without being the engine of revolution, education is essential to the revolutionary process; moreover, the revolution itself is an educational experience which shapes the individual. Revolutionary leaders need to understand this and not separate the two. Politicians on the left, contrary to their own dialectical thinking, tend sometimes to believe that education needs to be changed only after power has been won.

This seems to be a fundamental problem with every revolution.

Yes, but what I wanted to say is that revolutionary educational practice tends to be confused with schooling, and I am not talking about schooling here.

Take, for example, the relationship between the leaders and the popular masses, the example which leaders need to set if the masses are to adhere to the revolution. The task of the leadership is to authenticate itself as leadership — in close relationship with the masses. This search for authenticity is a pedagogical act as well. There is a naiveté in some revolutionary leaders — though not in Fidel Castro, or Guevara, or Amílcar Cabral — a belief that in talking of the educational character of revolutionary practice one is referring simply to schooling. Not at all. Changes in schooling follow the assumption of power, but the pedagogy of the revolution is embodied in revolutionary practice. Everything that is achieved, in terms of a

new pedagogy, during the struggle for power should be put to use by professional revolutionary educators. Unfortunately, however, they tend to repeat the traditional and authoritarian methods of the old society. Revolutionary leaders need to realise that there can be no separation between politics and education.

What you are referring to, it seems, is the difficult notion of praxis, the unity between theory and practice. How has this concept — in your interpretation — influenced the revolutions in which your work and literacy method were used, for example in Nicaragua, Africa and Chile?

If you ask me: 'Paulo, do you think that your ideas have been of fundamental importance in the process of revolutionary change in Nicaragua and Grenada, in the subsequent organisation of the new societies in those countries, or that you, as an educator and politician, were of fundamental importance in the organisation of the new states in Africa which emerged out of the Portuguese colonies? — then the answer is: No. But that is not false modesty. For it would not be true to say that I left no mark in the struggles of these people. I recognise that although my role was not fundamental, it was important. I am answering in historical terms.

I know from the testimonies I have received how important my book was in the struggle in Nicaragua. At a congress in Amsterdam, for example, the leader of the peasant associations in Nicaragua drew attention to the immense importance of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He told me: 'Your presence among us, your call, was more significant than you realise'. From a strictly educational point of view, too, I think that I have been influential.

Now, if you ask me how this realisation makes me feel, I would say, firstly, I feel happy because as a thinker, an actor in the

world, I think it is marvellous, beautiful to know that my work is being used. It is a source of great satisfaction to me to know that I won't have to die before people discover me. It is possible that in fifty years time my work will be negated. But today it is affirmed in the struggles of various peoples to become themselves. So I experience a legitimate feeling of joy. But at the same time I have a sense of great historical and social responsibility. For what happens to my work, whether it is accepted or negated, depends also on how I behave, on the example I give in my private and public life. It depends on my capacity to love, on my courage to speak of my feelings, to say that a revolution which does not love flowers is incapable of loving men and will not succeed. A revolution which does not dream, which puts limits on joy, is a false revolution, one that has lost its historical conscience.

As you have said, there was an important break in your life when you were exiled after the military coup in Brazil in 1964. Before your exile, your writing and your adult literacy method influenced the struggles of the popular classes against the established social order in Brazil. But in Guinea-Bissau and Nicaragua your thinking was used by those classes when they were already in power. In what way did your pedagogy differ in these different situations?

Some of my critics argue that my pedagogy works only in societies which have already carried out a revolution. Others, on the contrary, say that it doesn't work *after* a revolution because it's no longer needed. I don't agree. I think again that this is a way of dichotomising revolution and education. In a bourgeois class society like Brazil the question is: to what extent does the process of capitalist modernisation create political spaces which are not under the control of the dominant class?

These spaces do exist: in civil society, in the school, the university, in popular organisations, in mothers' and tenants' associations. The role of the revolutionary educator is to recognise and use these spaces and thus to help bring about the revolutionary transformation of society. In this sense, my pedagogy is equally valid in a society which has not carried out a revolution and in a society which has.

But a revolutionary society does not change mechanically. The assumption of power does not mean that the new society has arrived. Society then enters a period of transition, a period which began during the revolutionary struggle. However, the problem during this transitional period is that even revolutionary educators are deeply conditioned by their former experience; they are torn between their

Brazil Transforming reality

desire for revolutionary transformation and their attachment to traditional pedagogy. So, although the content of education changes, it is transmitted in an authoritarian form. While previously you had a form of authoritarian education which transmitted a kind of knowledge which benefited the interests of the bourgeoisie, now you have an authoritarian pedagogy which transmits knowledge representing the interests of the popular classes — as if the *method* itself were not directly connected to the content. It is essential that education be *critical* both in a pre-revolutionary and a revolutionary period.

In your work you talk about the need for a cultural synthesis in the revolutionary process between the systematic knowledge of the intellectual, and the empirical, living experience of the masses. This seems to me an important, though highly problematic idea.

You're right, this is a politically and ideologically difficult question. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I deal with the relationship between popular wisdom or common sense and rigorous scientific thought; between systematic and non-systematic thinking, between educated language, high culture and popular language — 'corrupt forms' as people often say. My thesis is the following: firstly, I don't think that popular wisdom is essentially inarticulate — if it were, ordinary communication would be impossible. And there is a coherence in popular wisdom, moments of abstraction fundamental to the act of knowing. But this commonsense knowledge is based on the pure experience of the subject in the world, his particular discovery of the world which, in a naive manner, he tends to generalise. Thinking at this level lacks scientific rigour.

Historically, however, we start precisely from this non-rigorous stance as we reach out to comprehend the planets, the stars, the flooding of rivers. Egyptian agriculture and astrology are intimately connected to modern astronomy and agriculture. If astrology had not existed, where would modern astronomy be? If you had not had common sense, would the scientific rigour of modern physics exist? Although I recognise the leap which men and women have taken historically in their attempt to understand the world, I refuse to make any absolute distinction between the common knowledge of the popular classes and the more precise knowledge of science.

Perhaps, to end, you could tell us about your activities since your return to Brazil in 1980.

I ought first to say that the whole time I was away, during my period of exile, I was preoccupied with Brazil, even when I cherished no hope of coming back. When I

heard that it *would* be possible to come back, I returned immediately with Elza, my wife, and my children to see again the earth and the waters; to feel again the smell of the earth; to hear the Portuguese language collectively spoken again. This was a very fulfilling experience.

My first return was in August 1979, and then I went back to Europe to prepare for my final homecoming. I didn't think it was appropriate simply to drop everything in Europe. So in June 1980 we came back and from then on I started a new apprenticeship — I began to learn again, to rediscover Brazil. I knew that Brazil had not stopped to wait for me during my almost sixteen years of exile.

To begin with I thought that I needed to re-encounter my country, to rethink it, and I began a kind of pilgrimage through Brazil. Invited by students, teachers and popular organisations, I travelled throughout the country. At the same time I began to teach at the Catholic University of São Paulo, which received me with open arms, and then at Unicamp University as well. I also participated in conferences at local, regional and national level, and travelled abroad, teaching at universities in Europe, North America and Latin America. Another activity I devoted myself to was re-reading certain texts, and reading for the first time Brazilian works that I didn't yet know. And for the first time in my life, I became involved with a political party, when I became a militant and founding member of the PT, the Workers Party. I chose the PT because its political dream coincides with mine and because it is a party which emerged from below, inspired by industrial and rural workers as well as by intellectuals who chose to side with their struggle.

I have continued to write, although my wife's death left me in a state of shock, of hopelessness and disorientation. A year has passed since then, and I have now remarried. I have started writing again as well as teaching abroad, in Massachusetts and California, and I am very happy to be living here, working with various groups and public bodies involved in popular education. This kind of work gives me great satisfaction. And although my conscience is not absolutely clear in that I am not doing as much as I could, it is at least the restless conscience of someone who, having already achieved certain things, would like to achieve still more. ■

Vivian Schelling is a sociologist and specialist on Paulo Freire's work.

Cristina Peri Rossi

Rebels and dinosaurs

A prominent Uruguayan writer, exiled under the dictatorship and now living in Spain, talks to translator Psiche Hughes about her experience of exile, about the peculiarities of her native culture, and about her view of the writer as nostalgic rebel. On p22 we publish her story 'The Annunciation' from the collection *La rebelión de los niños*

For many years I have written about exile and have given lectures on the subject. In 1984 I published a novel, *La nave de los locos* (*The Ship of Fools*, now translated into English) which is an allegory of exile as a metaphor of the human condition.

In totalitarian states art and literature in particular are often considered subversive and consequently censored. Many writers of my generation had to choose exile because of their political activities and writings. Unable to be published at home, our books, by then available abroad, remained banned in our countries. Exile became, by necessity, the theme of our work, whether spoken of in concrete terms, or metaphorically. But one can't go on living as a permanent exile. Sooner or later we have begun to look upon our adopted countries as our homes. We can and must take our part in society as individuals and intellectuals. The action of a true revolutionary is not — must not be — limited by native frontiers. In this sense I don't feel much division between my former life in Montevideo and my present existence in Barcelona. Though an exile, I have had the chance to contribute to the cultural and political life of Spain both by my public activities and by my writings as a journalist and an author. The worst danger for an exile is to remain enclosed in the ghetto formed by other exiles and to live outside the space and time to which he or she belongs.

Rebels and dinosaurs Uruguay

GLAUCA CAPOZZOLI



Cristina Peri Rossi.

A few years ago dictatorship ended in Uruguay; so strictly speaking we are no longer exiles: those of us who still live outside our country — for whatever reason — are now émigrés or travellers.

Personally, I consider myself a Uruguayan writer with roots in Spain; there is no real ambiguity here. There have always been artists and writers who have lived outside their native countries, and many who have written in the language of their adopted homes.

Women, however, simply because of their sex, are often exiles even in their own society. In many countries, patriarchal authority, which is ultimately dictatorial, marginalises women, excluding them from any form of self-expression and realisation other than those which are strictly biological and traditional. Outside motherhood, the feminine role is passive: passive in politics, in society, in sex. Yet many women have taken part in revolutionary activities. In Latin America such women, as well as men, have been 'disappeared', arrested, or tortured. And sometimes they have been held in worse conditions than men, just because of their sex.

As for Uruguay — a small country buried deep in the heart of Latin America — it lives on the memory of its distant origin, distant in space though culturally still strong and real. It is a rare phenomenon: an entirely European society, without indigenous roots, which is frequently compared to such countries as Switzerland or Sweden. Geographically separated from any European metropolis, it was founded on the nostalgia of hundreds of thousands of exiles who made it their second home, their adopted country. That's how it happens that three important

French writers are Uruguayans*, and that our surnames always ring with the sound of our Italian or Spanish grandfathers. Uruguay's temples and museums, its monuments to other times and cultures, lend it its air of unreality. This is, perhaps, why such a small nation has produced so many fine writers and artists. They live with a nostalgia for a political time from which they are excluded, a paradise lost to which they can never belong.

I went back to Uruguay after the fall of the dictatorship to see my mother and to rediscover my past, a past from which I had been exiled many years before. At present I am not thinking of returning to Uruguay, primarily because of economic considerations: I could not live there from my writings, as I do in Spain. If this or the next Uruguayan government asked me to work for my country in some capacity I might return. When I was there the only woman in the present cabinet, the Minister of Justice and Education, asked me if I would remain if she found me a job. I answered

The worst danger for an exile is to live outside the space and time to which she or he belongs

that I was prepared to stay only if the country needed me, not the government. If Uruguay needed me one day for a specific task which would benefit ordinary people, I would accept with pleasure.

This resolution has caused a profound change in my work; there is a difference in theme and style between *The Ship of Fools* and my latest novel, *Solitario de amor* ('Solitaire of love'). The theme of the latter is passion, a passion which is all-enveloping and destructive, an end in itself, leading to loneliness or death. I can no longer find absolute meaning in the metaphor of exile because I can no longer consider myself an exile in life. Now I find this meaning in an emotion which is both individual and subjective.

Of course I never write for a predetermined reader. I was lucky that my first five books were published in Uruguay, but the image I have of my reader is not confined to a specific time and space. My writing is not based on descriptions of actual places and customs, but on symbols which, I imagine, are universal. Perhaps the proof of this lies in the fact that those same books that were originally published in Uruguay appeared later in Spain and were then translated into other European

languages. For non-literary reasons my first readers were Uruguayan; then as a result of the dictatorship they ceased to be Uruguayan and became Spanish. Now, fortunately, there are fewer restrictions: I write in Spain for all readers, be they Latin American or European. My language in any case is not colloquial. My imaginary reader does not identify with a specific culture, but rather with the phantoms of my imagination. And these come from a collective unconscious which does not recognise frontiers.

After the so-called boom of Latin American literature the Spaniards feared for a while that Latin American writers had invaded their market. Perhaps for this reason the post-boom authors did not have the same success, even though many of their works deserved it. I must be one of the few Latin Americans whose books have come out in new editions in Spain. But there has been a certain ambiguity in the relationship between Latin American exiles and Spanish writers: the latter have felt that they were being taken over, and we have resented not being properly recognised.

All literary texts are ultimately about writing and language — but a writer's attitude to language can assume a political meaning, stand as a symbol of revolution. Many of my short stories and novels, especially *El libro de mis primos* ('The Book of my Cousins' 1969) feature children who rebel against patriarchal authority and dictatorship. This is illustrated by their not accepting the conventional forms of language which family, school and society impose upon them. Rebellion takes place first in language. Hence the character which feminism has taken on in Latin America, headed by such writers as the Brazilian Clarice Lispector. I think that both of us through our books have tried to achieve 'feminine writing' by the abolition of literary barriers and a personal use of vocabulary, structures and subjective fantasies which delve into the unconscious. The image of the dinosaur, which I often employ as a specific symbol, is an example of this. I am moved by the fate of the dinosaur as a victim of time and geological circumstances. In my opinion the dilemma of the dinosaurs, anachronistic creatures who disappeared because of their failure to adapt, is the dilemma of the artist and the writer. Baudelaire represented the poet in the image of the albatross. I prefer the dinosaur — viewed with a certain tenderness, in its gigantic weakness and refusal to adapt and change. ■

Cristina Peri Rossi was born in Uruguay in 1941 and has been living in Barcelona since 1972. She is the author of three novels and several volumes of poems and short stories.

* Leautrémont, Supervielle and Jules Laforgue.

Uruguay

Cristina Peri Rossi

The Annunciation

From *La rebelión de los niños*

I was gathering stones in the sea when the Virgin appeared. I gather big stones, not small ones. She seemed to come from the water, although I am not absolutely sure; it is such an expanse of water, and anyway I was crouching down with my eyes fixed on the stones. I pick the stones from the bottom, select them and carry them in my arms to the shore. At first I didn't think it was the Virgin.

The morning dawned grey like a sea of lead.

I had seen her only once, when we took her in procession out of the church. I never thought that I would see her walking towards me on the beach, with her eyes that colour and that sadness for the death of her son. I never thought of it because I am always alone here. And besides, she was not wearing her crown, walking softly with the sand under her feet. But then I didn't doubt any more. There is nobody else on this beach: it seems to be separated from the rest of the world. Removed, isolated, only visited by waves. When I gather stones, I am always alone here. To start with, my hands freeze and my fingers slip on the stones when I try to grip them, hunting for them as if they were sea-creatures. Stones like whales, mountains under the sea. In front of me, below me and at my side I can only see water, green, blue, shallow waters and large rocks rising from the surface like boats run aground. I plunge my fingers in and they slip on the wet surfaces. When I take the stones out of the water their colour changes. At times they are covered with sea-moss and lichens; at others they are covered in sea-weed where sea-urchins cling. Once my hands get used to the cold, they move in the water like fish. Then I place them on the dark surface of the stones, grip them between my fingers, and carry them to the shore in my arms.

We arrived ten days ago; we haven't seen anybody and nobody has seen us.

There are fishing boats stranded on the beach. One has wild flowers growing out of its rotting timber: green stalks and white petals sprout between the warped and splintered boards. The boat is slowly dying, a dying hulk sprawled on the sand. From time to time, a sea-gull beats the air around — wings spread out in the shape of the cross above the dark plumage of its chest — and comes to rest on the useless oar, buried in the sand. Time was when the fishermen went out to sea, each boat carried a lantern,

like an eye piercing the secret world of water and fish, a round, unblinking eye with a powerful, tranquil gaze. The fishermen tended the lanterns, trimmed them, watched over them. But now their fishing nets hang threaded with mould, spilling their menstrual blood on the sand.

Only a child playing in the sand and gathering stones.

At times a ship sails in the distance; here the sand spills into the abandoned boats. I gather stones and take them far from the edge of the sea out of reach of the waves lapping the shore. I work this way the whole morning. Often, I tire of carrying the stones. My fingers freeze and stiffen. The air turns green, the trees hiss in the wind and the waves begin to roar. Something is about to happen; the elements are plotting and in the belly of the sea a storm is brewing. But then I look at the water covering all those stones and go back to my work, without a second thought, without stopping, because there are still so many stones to be rescued. As I bend over, the water flows between my thighs carrying a few silvery fish, swift and nervous. I wonder whether they see me. I never know what fish see, where they look with their large staring eyes. Does their gaze divide the water, spread to the stones and the algae at the bottom of the sea? I was never a fish with fins at the side of my chest. I was not born in the water, never fed on algae.

The child is completely alone.

There are stones of many colours, of all the colours of the earth and the colours of the water, crusted as they are with lichen and other sea plants. If not from the sea, where else could she have come from? She was not wearing her crown. She walked slowly, as if floating over the sand.

And yet it is as though he were not alone, as though the stones and sound of the wind kept him company. Absorbed in his task he is part of the things around him. He has discovered his place, his function, which he performs with conviction and commitment. Only the sea-gulls could have seen us arrive.

I gather stones even when it rains and the wind blows. Sometimes the sea is very still when I enter; huge and peaceful like an elephant asleep. The boats don't move, their masts stand like crosses. Then the water lies stone-heavy, solid water made of concrete. Nothing stirs on the surface, nor beneath. The sea sits with uniform density. Its stillness imparts serenity. Even the birds seem to fly more slowly, clearing the surface. Other times the north winds whip

so fiercely that the seagulls can hardly fly; they hang in mid-air, wings outstretched, in the same spot. They shriek, but are held motionless as if on the end of a string. The sea is full of waves, waves which dissolve into the spumy air. The boats are restless, anxious to escape the storm by seeking refuge in the beach huts. Some are so desperate they tug at their ropes until they break free. Then, loose and fancy-free, they plunge aimlessly in all directions, banging into each other and against the rocks, smashing their hips against the stones. The wind howls, waves crash over the sea wall, and the red buoys disappear beneath the deep, bobbing back up like the heads of drowning men struggling to keep afloat until they are rescued. The sea howls, as if everything were about to crack apart, the leaden purple sky about to crack apart in flashes of lightning and thunder, the seagulls' wings about to crack apart, and the tiny jetty of wood and stone, the mooring ropes, the lanterns and masts swaying wildly from side to side.

How does the child come to be here? Who could have brought him?

How and from where did she come, to cross this sandy beach? Under the sea there are white statues. I've seen them. Carved images of women, some without an arm or leg, others without the whole head. They are not always there and can't always be seen. At times the colour of the sea hides them completely; flowing strands of weeds inhabited by sea-urchins disguise their presence. They are anchored at the bottom of the sea, they could be part of it, if only it were white and had hips like a woman. They never rise to the surface borne by the waves on a pedestal of water. No force lifts them from the bottom of the sea, hoisting them like flags. They never come up to study the sky, or stretch out on the sand like bathers. Nothing attracts them out of the water. They don't long to meet the air, touch the ground. Sunk on the sea-bed they occasionally offer a glimpse of a white limb hiding a profile, slender hands, the smooth columns of a neck. Secrets are hidden in the folds of robes while the fish swim blindly around, pecking breasts, caressing throats. These statues are so different from the mutilated corpses with frightened eyes, algae woven in their hair, which now and then the sea drags from the depths of the battle and returns to the shores. In compassionate silence, afraid to commit themselves, people gather their bodies — without teeth or ears, without

The Annunciation Uruguay

fingers or a whole hand — and bury them in the hills. Sad silent people hide them, scattering their bones like memorial stones in the woods, entrusting their remains to the earth.

How does the child come to be here? Who could have brought him?

I was lifting a stone when I saw her coming. I did not yet know who it was that was coming. The morning was green and the sea was gloomy. I just saw a grey silhouette carried by the wind. The stone was heavy; I had to lift it with both hands. It was still golden when I stole it from the bottom of the sea, but out in the air it darkened and showed little water bites, like numberless eyes looking at me. I laid the stone on the sand, away from the digging and scratching of the sea and then returned to the waves, watching the grey silhouette which was slowly approaching as if blown by the wind.

Who can this child be? He goes in and out of the water as if it were his domain. As if he alone reigned over it. But without pride. Like a worker. Absorbed in his task he doesn't seem to want to stop for rest.

That morning everything was green, grey and green as under the sea, as the fish swimming in formation among the stones.

I decided not to turn back because he had already seen me. Anyway, he seemed to be interested only in gathering stones.

I went backwards and forwards several times. There are so many stones to be fetched. The bottom of the sea is always full of them. She was approaching slowly, like the wind and the waves, pressing the sand under her feet. Walking slowly, her arms motionless, her legs hardly moving. If not from the water, where else had she come from? I was very busy with the stones, all the work they gave me, and I was only looking in front of me. I couldn't see what was happening elsewhere.

I had assumed that the child was not interested in me, when he suddenly stared at me in recognition, as if he had seen me before. He gazed at me as if he began to identify every one of my features, as if memory brought to him in flashes physical traces of my presence. He stood up in front of me, now completely sure of himself.

I was about to carry on with my work, to go back once more to crouch in the water and gather more stones, when I looked at her closely, and I recognised her. I was petrified.

I hesitated for a moment, with the child standing in front of me. I thought of running

away. Flight.

It's not every day that you see the Virgin emerge from the water. Not every day she comes walking along the beach. Her clothes were dry, she didn't seem to have got at all wet. Her eyes were the colour of the sea, that same colour I saw the day they brought her out of the church and we carried her in procession around the village. The children and the old folk were carrying her like a sea trophy. As if she were some rare, gigantic fish which could feed us for the whole year. Out of the church, along the paved streets, everybody came to see her. All the windows opened and from the balconies the women and little ones were throwing flowers. The old and the sick got out of bed to see her and the men who were drinking at the zinc bars put their glasses down and took their hats off to greet her with respect.

Throughout the procession I was terrified she might fall from her pedestal and roll down the paving stones. Then her black mourning cloak would get dirty and she would lose that beautiful handkerchief she held in her hand to wipe away the tears for the death of her son. Throughout the procession I was nervously watching her feet for fear she might sway and fall and her fine, delicate porcelain hands be damaged, her crown be lost and the water spill out of her eyes.

—
*Their steps were heavy,
the steps of armed men,
capable of anything*
—

I remember we once caught a very large fish. A holiday was proclaimed and the fish was taken out in procession and everybody came to see it. In the evening we lit candles and made bonfires on the beach. Out at sea, the whales mournfully moaned throughout the night.

I didn't run from her, I ran towards her and when I was near, I knelt quite formally, just for a moment. She looked calmly at me; I raised my head and saw that she did have eyes the colour of water, just as I remembered from the day we took her out in the procession. Sad and unspeakably tender eyes. The eyes of the woman whose son had been killed and who suffers so much that she cannot bring herself to think of revenge, because her pain is such that it cannot hold resentment, only love. They

had butchered her son and perhaps his body is still floating out at sea and one of these days it will appear on the shore, beheaded and twisted, thronged with seaweed and lichen, covered with slime. That's why she was walking on the beach, serene though her eyes were full of grief. I offered her a bowl made from fish bone to gather her tears if she wanted to cry. It was made from the cheek bone of a very large fish and could be used to dig holes in the sand, hold small quantities of water, fruit juice and women's tears. After a while the bone of a fish dries up and turns white, speckled here and there with black holes. She seemed to like her present, but did not cry in it. She held it for a long time and looked in it as in a mirror. I began to clean the sand for her to sit down. I chose a small square recess surrounded by wild reeds which gave shelter from the wind. The sand dunes all around are so tall you can hardly see the woods. Firm and solid as pyramids, they resist the whiplash of the wind and the sea's erosion. I swept the space with willow branches, clearing it of ants and other insects, of fragments of wood, shells and flotsam. On my knees I carefully cleaned a place for her to sit and patted it flat, smooth and comfortable for her.

I was taken aback and didn't know what to do. The child asked no questions, in fact he didn't open his mouth. He offered me a bowl made out of fish bone and began to clean the sand behind a dune, clearing it of dirt and rubbish. I looked around, hoping to find a way to escape.

I invited her to sit down. With a gesture I invited her. I stretched out my right arm for her to lean on as she slowly sank down and sat in that throne of fresh sand. She looked tired. God knows how far she had come, running along the shore, with so much pain in her, running and suffering. She must have lost her crown, or perhaps they had taken it from her, just as they had taken her son. She had also lost the lovely handkerchief she used to hold in her hands to dry her tears, and the light robe which covered her was obviously not warm enough to protect her from the cold. I invited her to sit down because she seemed tired and the wind was strong; the tide was advancing, but there she would be safe.

In front and behind me the beach, which we all thought was deserted, stretched endlessly. I wasn't familiar with the hills, nor did I know how far the sea reached. My only chance was to turn back, in spite of the cold and my tiredness, but then the child might

Uruguay The Annunciation

have followed me. He would have asked questions. I was nervous, sensing some bad omen. Suddenly, the grey and purple sky opened up, showing the sun: a metal disk shining out the last colours of its agony. The outline of a distant wood enveloped in mist seemed to hang between the sea and the sky. The air was sultry and heavy with the imminent storm. The breaking waves and the wind above them sounded like the death-rattle of some gigantic sea-monster hidden beneath the water. Everywhere was a feeling that something was about to happen.

Once she had sat down I signalled for her to wait and ran towards the woods in search of pine branches, wild flowers and poppies. I know the place well but I was in such a state of excitement that I wasted time taking the wrong turnings. I was just like a puppy, jumping about and rolling senselessly in all directions at the sight of his master. I kept on losing my way along overgrown paths and my hands got scratched as I tugged at flowers and plants, pulling them out by the roots, or bending the stems in my eagerness. I crushed ivy beneath my feet. Meanwhile my ears were listening for the sound of the coming tide, listening for its stealthy progress. Though I couldn't see, I could hear. It was an enemy I knew well, one which needed watching out for, always ready to take advantage of any moment of carelessness on my part. I came running back with armfuls of pine branches and wild flowers. In my hurry I even lost some. I found her sitting in her square patch of sand, sheltered from the sea, the wind and the ants. She seemed melancholy, looking around her without seeing; her light robe shook like a sail in the breeze. One by one I placed the aromatic branches in a circle round her feet, making sure they didn't touch her dress. Some were grey, patched with paler lichen. You have only to scratch the bark slightly and the true skin of the pine appears, green and resinous. Others were dry, brittle and pointed, the sort used to start a good fire in the winter. I thought that their smell would help her to bear her sadness. She was not looking at me. She was staring into the distance and the water of her eyes was deep like a misty day preparing for a storm. Young pine-cones clustered along the branches, their outer layer already beginning to harden, glisten. And among the branches lay white nests of starlings, smooth and silky like tufts of cotton; dozens of finely woven cocoons which the birds had skilfully embroidered. I thought that their soft, smooth structure would give her a sense of welcome. Surrounded by plants, flowers and reeds, she looked like the Virgin of the Mountain come down to the shore to look at the sea.

Next I went to fetch an old wooden beam

shaped like a seal which the sea had washed ashore the previous day. Sometimes the sea carries things ashore and then leaves them there as if it had travelled for days and nights just in order to do this, to dump on the beach all the souvenirs gathered on its journey. These are the humble gifts of the ocean, endlessly tumbled backwards and forwards from the depths to the surface and finally flung out: a dead fish, a rotten beam, a handful of seaweed, an open, empty shell. They are its wet and humble gifts. That beam had been left the day before; I found it not far away on the shore, still lapped by the waves, and I dragged it in. It was hard work because the water had made it very heavy. It had the shape and colour of a seal. I held it by its head and ribs, pulling it onto the dry sand. When I went to look for it it was much drier but it was still a seal. Once again I held it by the head and dragged it along the beach to place it at the Virgin's side. I left it there next to her, looking in the direction of the sea, in case it missed the world from which it came, where it had been rocked since birth. Meekly it lay there, keeping its head upright, as if to watch over the coastland. Guarded by the shape of the seal, her throne seemed less bare, her kingdom more secure. With the pine branches, the reeds and flowers around her, under the solemn protection of the seal, she looked more and more like the Virgin I saw that time when we took her out of church upon a makeshift pedestal, wrapped in a black cloak. This time too I offered her a large bunch of white, yellow, mauve and blue flowers that I had gathered. I ran down the woody slopes to place them one by one on her dress. From time to time she looked back — at her dead son — and her eyes were full of sorrow. I pointed inland to indicate where the flowers came from and that there were still many more, only I couldn't fetch them because I had other things to do for her. The water was advancing implacably, every surge brought it closer to us. It left a wet mark edged with foam on the sand, and then retreated innocently, as if it had never been there, as if it were trying to conceal its progress. I looked at the sea and then at her. There was still an appreciable distance between them, but all the same I began to build a barrier of sand in case some stray rivulet of water reached her feet. I work very fast because I am used to fighting the sea. Quickly I built a wall, a dam a few centimetres high, a fortress against the infiltration of the water. I built it only this high because I wanted her to be able to go on looking at the sea without having to lift her head. But the sea could hardly see her.

The child brought me little gifts gathered from the sea and the woods. I don't know why he did so but I knew I couldn't stop him.

Whatever his intentions, his gestures were eager, humble almost, and I was too tired to refuse those gifts, no matter how misplaced. Frightened, tired and with no energy left, I realised that I mustn't stay too long. It was undoubtedly dangerous to stay unarmed and without cover, on that vast open beach. Just as dangerous as leaving and having the child follow me. He could call after me, betraying my presence. I sat there in silence, not knowing what to do, unable to take any decision, succumbing to tiredness rather than obeying common sense. All the time he was coming and going, bringing me his small presents.

I went for an old oar, half hidden in the sand. It came from a fishing boat which had been eaten away by salt and water and whose broken carcass was now a refuge for birds. At times I had played inside the old boat, among the puddles of stale water, stroked its wooden skeleton and the beams of its keel. I had felt its skin, rubbed its cavities. Now the oar raised its wider end above the sand which buried it, full of holes and useless. I brandished it like a sword above my head, shaking free the sand sticking to its blade. I ran along the deserted shore to the dune where the Virgin was resting. Pleased with myself, I offered it to her, showing her how to use it. First I held it as if I were rowing, then I brandished it to show her that it could be used as a weapon of self-defence. She didn't pay much attention to my instructions, she seemed worried, and kept on looking over her shoulder. All the same I left the oar lying beside her like a queen's sceptre. I thought then of the hole in the rock where I kept the objects I rescued from the sea. I was glad that I had managed to gather some things every day, for now I was able to give them to her. Silently she seemed to be waiting. And I was happy to go backwards and forwards, like the sailor who returns home from his travels, loaded with gifts, and with a mixture of love and pride displays silks from China, cloth from Holland and jewels from Egypt. But her mournful eyes were still looking over her shoulder, without seeing. How afraid I had been that she might fall from the pedestal! They had chosen us, the children and elderly, to carry the Virgin through the crowd and lead her round the village. My task had been to push the pedestal at one corner. There was a deep ceremonial silence when we came out of the church. The old men and women went in front and we children followed.

We had remained hidden for ten days. Nobody had seen us, none of us had been recognised. Only one of our women walking along the shore met a child.

We pushed the cart, which kept on bumping against the paving stones of the

The Annunciation Uruguay

streets, shaking and lurching. She was in mourning because they had killed her son and wore her black velvet cloak which covered her from head to foot. She was very sad and the pain showed in her tearful eyes, the colour of water. The black cloak was soft, a deep black, full of death. I touched its hem and shivered. But now she had cast off her mourning because her son had died a long time ago. A long time ago but still the same loss. Although no longer in black, she was still suffering. And her hands — the fine white hands which peeped from under the black cloak — held a lace handkerchief, obviously to dry her cheeks when all the tears contained in her eyes after the death of her son began to flow. The border of her cloak was embroidered in gold, a delicate design of golden thread which I didn't dare touch. She hadn't cried yet because the handkerchief was still dry, but she had the look of a person who was on the verge of tears. Not loud and screaming, as is the habit of the village women, but a sad frail keening. The cry of a mother who mourns the death of her son is not loud; it is choked with pain. When we came out of the church, they had lit the torches. The wrinkles on the faces of the old people hardened in the light of the candles. And I was so afraid that she might fall.

'She might fall,' I said to one of the village children who walked beside me.

'Not if we go carefully,' he answered.

I was anxious all the same. If one of the others was less careful, she could easily lose her balance, damage herself, scratch her hands, dirty her cloak, lose that beautiful handkerchief. It would be easier to defend her from the soldiers (those soldiers who killed her son) than to prevent her falling.

'One of the others might be careless,' I insisted.

'She won't fall,' my companion assured me. 'There are enough of us to keep her steady.'

There were many things in that hole in the rock. Old fish hooks, rusty but still sporting their threatening tips. Lengths of fishing lines which had come off the rods, patches of fishing nets stained with mould, large sea-shells in which you can hear the sea even when far away and out of sight. An enormous fish bone bleached by the sun, a donkey's jaw-bone and many shards of coloured glass smoothed by the waves, tree bark covered with lichen, ropes and sailor's knots, twisted nails, and from a sunken ship a wooden chest which had been floating out at sea. I put my hands in the hole and one by one I pulled everything out. With my arms loaded I ran to her — still crouched there, looking over her shoulder — and placed my treasure in her lap. The sea was coming closer every minute, lapping the base of my dam. I

planted the fish bone on top of it like a watch tower or a light-house shining in the night to warn the sailors of imminent danger. I laid the net at her feet, a ceremonial carpet for her to step on. It was clean and delicately webbed. All around her I arranged the pieces of glass polished by the sea, rooks, pawns and bishops, emblems of a game; a horse's head in mauve, a steely sword, a golden lantern, a cathedral the colour of mistletoe, the emerald eye of a fish. The knots I rested on the tips of her flowing hair to stop it from flying away, anchoring it to the sand lest it blow away to cry its pain elsewhere. And the ropes I tied around her waist to hold her, as one makes fast a boat to the quay against the wind and the shoving of the sea. Surrounded by these trophies, she was now the Virgin of the Waters, or perhaps a sea statue or the figurehead of a boat which I once saw in the Museum. I made a crown with a vine shoot to encircle her head. It was sombre with dark green leaves growing out from either side of the supple stem. Slowly, respectfully, I placed it on her brow. Now she looked finished, perfect, like the statue of the Virgin in the church. Shiny wet strands of seaweed hung on her robe like a cloak.

The child came and went from the water to the shore, but always stayed at some distance without touching me. A bird flew by and he threw a stone at it. He scrupulously scared away the ants and small sea creatures. He watched carefully the progress of the tide, constantly on the move, busily bringing me presents.

It was then that I heard a sound, not one of the sounds coming from the sea or the shore. I know all the sounds of the beach: the call of the birds, the swishing of the waves, the murmur of underground currents. I know the roar of the distant wind, of the clouds charged with electricity. I rose to my feet and looked around the beach. The rising tide was beginning to seep into the dam I had built. The fish bone, tall like a light-house, was pointing to the harsh sky. The wash of the waves left seaweed on the shore. The seal, head erect, watched alert nearby.

I had to decide: either talk to the child or run back to our hiding place, though this meant risking his following me, even if at a distance.

The sound came from inland; it was not made by the wind in the trees nor by the birds on the branches; it was dull and metallic, a human sound. I stood up, on guard while she kept on looking over her shoulder.

'Where are the soldiers who killed her son?' I asked when we took the Virgin out of the church.

'I don't know,' my friend answered. 'Just

make sure you push the cart carefully.'

I realised that they were looking for her. I had been playing all this time without worrying about this. I had wasted all this time without thinking that the soldiers would soon be here. I know the sounds of the woods and of the sea well. I know the sound of the storms, of the wind approaching, the song of the fish. They had made him carry a heavy cross all the way to his crucifixion. They had mocked her pain, and would not hesitate to do the same again if they found her. The tide was now climbing up the dam, reaching the fish bone.

It was then I heard a sound. Not just a sound but a succession of sounds. It filled me with anguish and fear. I don't know the sounds of the country or the sea. I have always lived in a city.

They were coming, there was no doubt about it, coming from beyond the wood; their steps were heavy, the steps of armed men, capable of anything. With their cruel swords, their crowns of thorns, their summary justice, their slow crucifixions.

The sea-gulls shrieked, the tide kept rising. The pine-trees sighed in the wind. Things began to break: I heard the cracking of branches, the tumbling of the stone.

I ran to the top of the bank. I saw them coming with guns and rifles.

I decided to run back in the direction I had come from. I trod on the flowers, crushed the sea-shells and a piece of glass cut my foot. I ran without looking back, frightened by the sound of the water, of the wind, by the cries of the birds.

They were coming with their guns and rifles, dogs, knives and torches. Lots and lots of Roman soldiers, their officials, their servants, vassals and slaves.

I ran without thinking, without knowing where I was going, in the water, through the birds and the wind. I looked backwards and saw him brandishing oars above his head to frighten the soldiers. He must have caught them by surprise in the evening shadows. Knocking down two or three of them he continued to whirl round and round, flailing those oars like a human windmill. The child must have caught the soldiers unawares. It was getting dark and he was very agile and moved rapidly from one side to the other without letting go of his weapons.

I ran without thinking, without knowing where I was going, in the water, through the birds and the wind. I ran to stop them.

I looked at him no more, but ran on. Suddenly I heard the cough of firearms. The only sound we recognise in the city. ■

Translated by Psiche Hughes

China

Bei Dao

The importance of being 'ordinary'

One of the most prominent figures in China's 'Democracy Movement', poet Bei Dao recently spent a year in England, where he was interviewed by Michael March

Bei Dao, the pen name of Zhao Zhenkai, is one of the most gifted and controversial young poets in China today. Born in Beijing in 1949, the year the Chinese Communists came to power, he grew up in a mid-level cadre family that had originally come from the Shanghai region.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Bei Dao, like many members of his generation, joined the Red Guard movement. Soon disillusioned, he became an outsider and asserted his individuality in literature. During the seventies, Bei Dao and his fellow underground poets created an alternative literature which, as his translator Bonnie McDougall points out, challenged the orthodoxy of the entire post-1949 period, in language, imagery, syntax and structure. This in itself was an act of political defiance.

On 5 April 1976 Bei Dao took part in a mass demonstration in Beijing's Tianamen Square to mourn the death of premier Chou Enlai (who had died in January) and in protest against the dictatorship of Mao Zedong and the 'Gang of Four', the leaders of the Cultural Revolution. Some of his poems, including 'The Answer', were read on that occasion and later became famous. The demonstrators were violently dispersed, and their speeches and poems declared 'counter-revolutionary'. 'April Fifth' later became a symbol of the protest which developed into the 'Democracy Movement' or 'Beijing Spring' of 1978. Unofficial publications appeared throughout the country, and in Beijing alone there were a dozen of them. Bei Dao and his friend and fellow-poet Mang Ke published and edited Jintian ('Today'), probably the best unofficial literary publication of the Democracy Movement.

In 1979 and in the years that followed, all these unofficial publications were banned. More than twenty publishers and editors were arrested and sentenced to long-term imprisonment for 'counter-revolutionary activities'. The best-known among them were Wei Jingsheng, editor of Tansuo ('Exploration'), and Xu Wenli, editor of Siwu Luntan ('April Fifth Forum'), who were each

sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment (See Index 5/1979, 1/1980, 2/1981 and 5/1986).

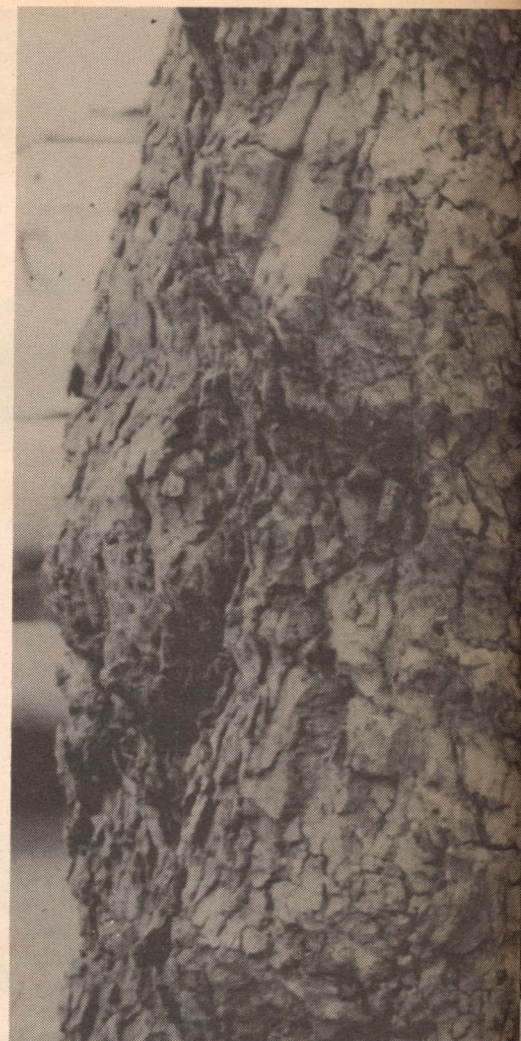
Bei Dao escaped arrest, but Today was eventually closed down in September 1980. Some of Bei Dao's poems and short stories, however, later appeared in a number of official publications – a sign of the confusion which reigned during the early years of the post-Mao reforms. Under the new leader Deng Xiaoping's 'liberalisation policy', Bei Dao's writings are at best considered peripheral by the cultural authorities, though in more repressive periods, such as during the 'Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign' (1983) and during the 'Anti-Bourgeois-Liberalisation Campaign' (1986-7) his works were among those singled out as targets of attack.

In Bei Dao's work over the last eight years Bonnie McDougall finds a new bitterness and despair: 'The language is much harsher [than in his earlier work], cold and clinical, and images of barrenness replace the earlier fertile symbolism of the sea and the secluded consolation of the valley. The world is now more pressing: escape, while more urgent, is less possible'. She sees his poetry as above all an 'attempt to reveal the true nature of self, to identify both public and private wounds, to trust in instinctive perceptions, and to reach out to other afflicted souls'.

In March 1987 Bei Dao, partly sponsored by the Great Britain-China Centre, came to Britain as a visiting fellow at Durham University's School of Oriental Studies. Shortly before he left in August this year to take up a new fellowship at the university of Iowa (USA), he was interviewed by Michael March. Bei Dao – who does not consider himself a 'dissident' – preferred to focus on his work as a poet rather than on politics. Lek Hor Tan

Michael March: After the Cultural Revolution was there a longing to return to classical Chinese roots? The Tao Te Ching says that 'the longest way is the way back'.

Bei Dao: This is a philosophical problem, perhaps related to a poem of mine called



'Returning To My Home City'. For me, 'the way back home' has many layers of meaning. One meaning is the return to the original location of my life, to the source of my life. And if that is what is meant, then it is a very long road. I am less concerned by the idea of returning to the origin of Chinese culture. This too is a very long road, but it is not a road that I want to return to. Many Chinese poets have made the return on this road. Originally, they wanted to leave it. But in the end, they returned.

Why?

It's a very complex topic. If I simplify it — the history of Chinese culture is so long, we have many splendid achievements — it has a very strong attractive power. And a particular feature of Chinese culture is its closed aspect, the fact that it's a closed system. It is very easy to rely on this cultural system. That's why, ever since the Fourth of May Movement*, many Chinese poets who intended to write new poetry, to start again, have, in the end, returned to traditional poetry.

The importance of being 'ordinary' China

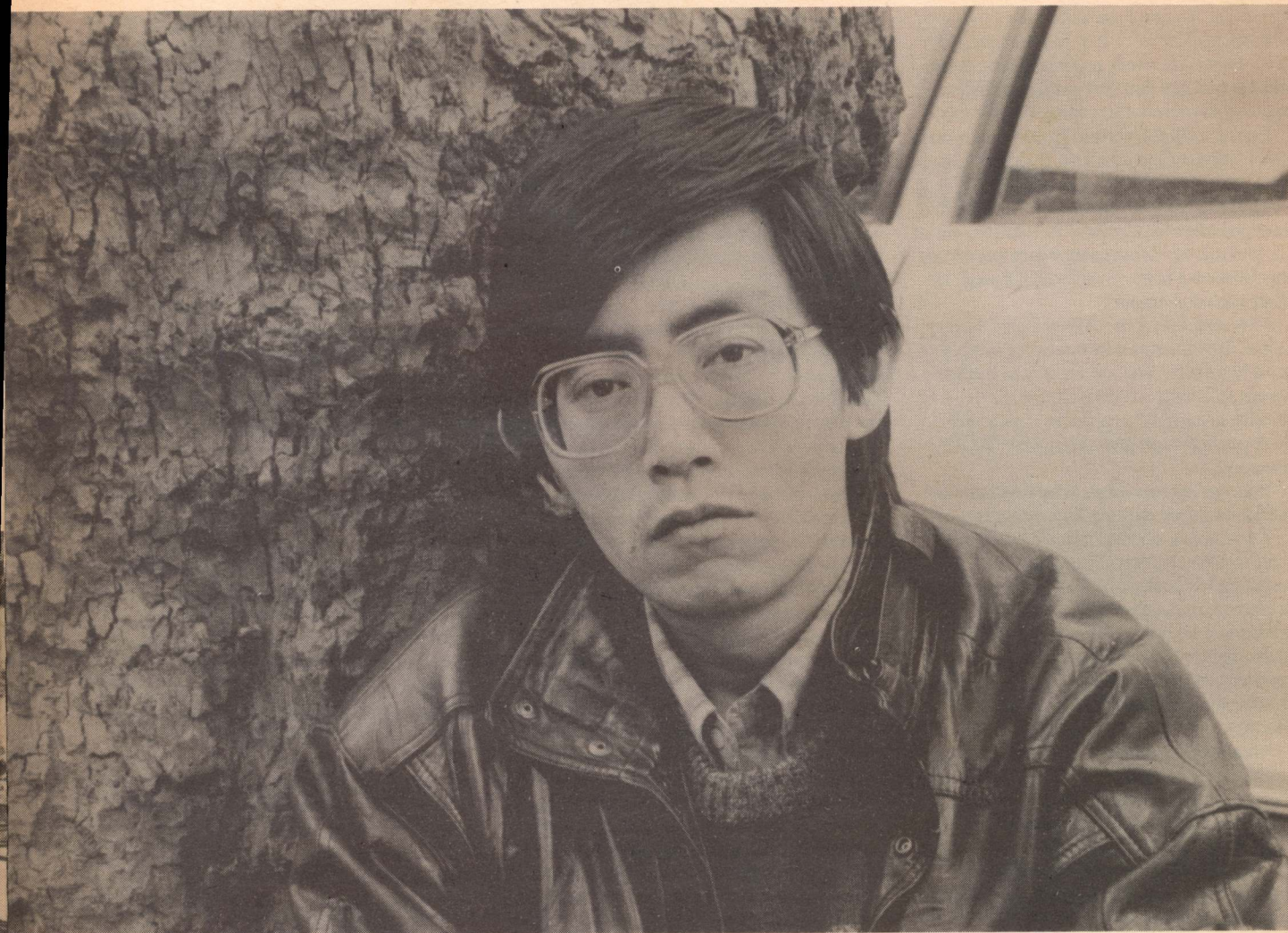


PHOTO OF BEI DAO BY ANVIL PRESS

Now you find yourself in Durham. What are your impressions having spent a year in the West?

I talked with a friend about this. I said that if I'd been out of China for just a week, I could have written a book. If I'd been out for a month, perhaps I could only have written an essay. Now that I've been here for over a year, I think I won't be able to produce anything at all. Of course, the cultural differences are great, but sometimes I feel we should forget these differences and look at ourselves in a new way. I have found a real sense of being on my own. The road that I talked about, the road back, is the road to the origin of myself, my life. I think that I suffered a misapprehension about myself, in that I had been influenced, within my own thoughts, my own feelings, by society's attitudes. In China you're always being criticised or being praised. Both have a malign influence. Here, I have realised the importance of being an ordinary person. The most important thing is living your own life.

But can a poet be ordinary?

First of all you should be an ordinary person. What you are afterwards, I don't mind.

The Party in China would agree with you. They would say that everyone is ordinary, sharing a common base. But what your generation in China saw in your poetry was precisely your very personal voice.

In China's dark period I wanted to express some opposition, but I didn't feel that I was representing anybody. I don't agree with the idea of representing people. I don't agree with the idea of people representing others.

Why has your poetry been so popular with students, with the younger generation in China?

I think there are two aspects to this. My poetry is a voice of truth. So in a society filled with lies, it is possible to find something real in it. But many young people misunderstand. They want to find a way to get rid of their frustrations. I remember once in Sichuan. We were holding a reading. Several thousand people

had come, so they burst down the doors. We were treated like pop stars at pop concerts in the West. I am rather suspicious of this. Poetry is a minority occupation. Their interest was a political interest. Although I understood their feelings, it was regrettable, a misunderstanding on their part.

If we live in a society which lies to us, how do we overcome the lies, how do we find truth to express ourselves?

That's a very difficult question to answer. Of course, you should respond to lies with truth. But sometimes you find in your own voice a flavour of falseness, a touch of falseness even though you want to be true. It is very difficult to find a method, a way in which to oppose lies.

In a statement about poetry you said: 'Perhaps the whole difficulty is only a question of time and time is always just.' Is time just, now that you're an 'old man'?

It is a fine hope. As a man lives between hope and despair, so he lives between conspiracy and judgement.

In 'The Answer' you speak of coming into