

SOME WRITE TO THE FUTURE ARIEL DORFMAN

Translated by George Shivers with the author

Essays
on
Contemporary
Latin
American
Fiction



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To my mother and my father

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Note on the Translations

The essays on Asturias, Borges, Arguedas, and the testimonial literature of Chile have been translated by George Shivers with the author. The essay on Carpentier has been translated by the author directly from the Spanish. The introduction and the essay on García Márquez have been written directly in English by the author for this collection. The essay on Roa Bastos was written in English as a foreword to a second edition of Son of Man, published by Monthly Review Press.

 Twenty-three years have passed since I wrote the essay on Miguel Angel Asturias that opens this collection of my writings on contemporary Latin American fiction. The year was 1967, I was barely twenty-five myself, I did not have even one book published, my first son had just been born—but most important of all, I had no idea of what history was preparing for me, for my loved ones, for my country. The violence, the creative intervention of memory, the role of myth and language in resistance, categories which are all analyzed and dissected in that essay, would all too soon find their equivalents, their confirmation or their denial, in immediate political developments. I could not anticipate when I sat down in 1967 to explore in words the relationship in our culture of literature and hope, literature and repression, that three years later my country would elect Salvador Allende as its president in an attempt to give that hope a real historical chance of materializing. Nor could I have realized that three years after that a military coup would destroy that hope and the democracy which nurtured it. And I certainly could never have predicted that, included as a small part of the general disaster, I would be sent, with my family, into an exile which is only now, as I write this in 1990, coming to what I assume is a definite end.

In one sense, then, the distance that separates that first essay, written in Santiago in Spanish for a Chilean audience, from the last essay in this collection or from this very introduction I am composing right now, in English, in the United States, presumably for a predominantly North American audience, could not be greater. I am not, could not be, do not want to be, the young man who sat down in 1967 to write about Asturias, or the year after that about Borges, or ten years later from the distance of banishment about Arguedas and the *testimonio*. I would not today write those essays in the same way. This does not mean, of course, that I renounce their paternity or, for that matter, validity. What I feel, to the contrary, is that each one continues to open up authors and books and to challenge the readers to a more provocative understanding of literature and Latin America. And these diverse writings,

organized in chronological order, can also be perused as signals of my own literary evolution and interests, the secret ways in which history forced me to deal differently and ever more deeply with obsessions that, expressed as well in my fiction, poetry, and plays, have remained with me through the years.

Which, naturally, brings up another sort of dilemma—or risk—of anthologies that span almost a quarter century of intellectual activity. Where is the unity in these writings, can a common thread be discerned and pursued through them all, can their inclusion under one roof be even remotely justified?

A tentative answer would affirm and point to one irrefutable constancy: all of these meditations stem from the same fierce belief that our literature has an important role, indeed an essential one, to play in the liberation of the people of Latin America. It was easier to hold that belief back in 1967 when it seemed that radical revolutions were about to sweep the South American continent than now in 1990 when the chances for significant change in our social and economic structures appear to be considerably reduced, but I still stubbornly proclaim that only an exploration of the ways in which our contemporary fiction subverts prevalent power, or submits to it, can reveal that fiction's true character.

It is paradoxical, of course, that this process of subversion (or of submission) must be carried out in a continent where the communication between the writer and the reader has not only been severely restricted throughout history but has, if anything, grown more regressive in the last decades. A series of barriers, each one more impenetrable, have been erected between those who denounce through their writing a world in dire need of citizen participation and the very citizens supposedly being stimulated and activated. To begin with, most Latin Americans are nonreaders: millions don't know how to read or write and the majority of those who do spend their intelligence on mass-produced, easily digested words that instead of impelling them to question their society tend to demand that they accept it. But there is also the succession of inquisitorial fires that have, in the last centuries, with a recent recrudescence, burned books (to say nothing of readers and writers) across our latino continent, there is the flagrant censorship of texts and the less visible, but equally implacable, censorship of the marketplace, an economic system that turns litera-

ture into a supreme luxury. The specialized communication that arises between a writer and a reader is not immune from the same chronic ills that afflict all attempts by inhabitants of our lands at connecting with one another in a dialogue: hunger, unemployment, lack of infrastructure for education, cruel and incompetent government officials, gross gender inequalities, and, of course, systematic violation of the basic human rights of anyone who dares to protest against this sorry state of affairs. If in the last fifteen years many eminent writers—whose faces are on the book jackets of novels translated into a variety of foreign languages—have “disappeared,” what of the more voracious and less glaring extermination endured by those who would read the forbidden words but do not even have that pale, and it turns out useless, defense of being well-known? Not to mention the faraway brothers and sisters who, if they were ever to open a book, would see it as hardly more than a blank page.

And yet, this very absence of a real reader for the fiction that needs one so desperately, that desires so much an answer from reality to its echo of despair, implies a literary strategy that demands of that reader an unceasing birth, that calls for him or her to go beyond the enclaves of the past, the monoproduction of ideas and emotions, that urges the reader to leave behind passivity and apathy and to participate, to appear and—in a word—to develop. I have often wondered if the formal ruptures in a great part of our twentieth-century literature, its linguistic violence, its fractured levels of appeal and questioning structures, although undoubtedly the result of Western cultural modernist influences, do not profoundly owe themselves to the need to reach the blockaded readers gnawing at the shores of the text. Is it not possible that those nonreaders are our secret and omitted coeditors, white shadows that, however unseen, are always there waiting to materialize? Is the sheer weight of that unexpressed universe, of those millions of mute voices, not always silently present and intermingled in every cloistered word that is born in Latin America?

What I am suggesting is that, although a majority of those readers are constricted by social circumstances from an effective everyday interpretation of the books meant for them, they are, nevertheless, radically implicit in the structure and language of the books themselves, exercising a critique of, and longing for, those

messages. Precisely because the world into which these words are born, with its prevalence of hierarchy and tyranny and enforced amnesia, the literature of Latin America tends, in general terms, to require what I would timidly call an anti-authoritarian reading and reader. Rather than establish with readers a relationship of propaganda or denunciation (though these are perfectly legitimate functions of the written word in a continent that cries out for liberation), most of the more interesting social literature in Latin America does not today circumscribe its political role to changing the immediate consciousness of the subject, verifying its effectiveness by measuring alterations in the behavior of the reader. This sort of aesthetic relationship would reproduce and preserve in the work of art the sort of unilateral verticality that is supposedly being attacked in the larger society where the writer must live and create. The authors I study in the following pages—and the very essays that study them—conceive of the reader in a more respectful way, as if she were a citizen of the future, trusting him to decide the multiple ways in which the work must be internalized in order to be fulfilled, giving to them the task of completing the fiction massively and plurally in the mirror or the window of their community.

Inasmuch as the works that we are going to examine purified our language, provoked the readers as mature and complex individuals instead of patronizing them, presented them with contradictions and dilemmas that refused to be solved in the literature itself, they are part of the slow—all too slow—democratization of Latin America. These meditations of mine, as well as the books that inspired them, are based on the hope, as alive now as it was in 1967, that the violence inscribed like a curse in our literature since its origins can be resolved, through action or compassion or doubt or rage or tenderness, in the lives of the liberated readers of today and tomorrow and beyond.

Durham, North Carolina, June 1990

■ *Men of Maize*: Myth as Time and Language

■ A strange fate has befallen Miguel Angel Asturias's masterpiece, *Men of Maize*. Along with Alejo Carpentier's remarkable *The Kingdom of This World*, which was also published in 1949, it could well be said to inaugurate the extraordinary renaissance of the contemporary Latin American novel. And yet it has been consistently underrated by critics and neglected by readers.

Most critics seem to feel it to be a confusing, explosive splinter, not easily cataloged in Asturias's production. They prefer the dynamic coherence of the previously published and more famous *El Señor Presidente*, and would probably have liked to proceed in orderly fashion from that novel about the internal tyranny of a country to the Banana Trilogy with which Asturias, some years later, would portray the external tyranny of imperialism. They feel *Men of Maize* to be deficient, lacking in unity, unwieldy and fragmented, a generic amalgam. Readers seem to agree, finding the novel boring or difficult—a conclusion I base on numerous conversations and the even more telling fact of its three sparse editions (1949, 1954, 1957), until, after a ten-year delay, Editorial Losada, its hand forced by the Nobel prize, has finally brought out a fourth edition.

Even those few critics who recognize *Men of Maize*'s outstanding qualities, have had to accept the arguments of its detractors, affirming its greatness in spite of its defects. Giuseppe Bellini, for instance, who has given it the most affectionate consideration, asserts that its unity is not to be found in the plot but rather in the "climate." In order to transmit the "spirit of Guatemala," he suggests, or because it is a "symphonic poem" which mixes the social and the mythic spheres, its structure is inevitably dispersed.¹

If we are to rescue a work that has contributed so significantly to the founding of a new dynasty in Latin American fiction, a new way of transmitting and understanding our reality, we must go beyond such vague generalizations. Only a close reading of its six parts, attempting to find the novel's hidden unity, will allow, I believe, a real understanding of the significance and originality of *Men of Maize*, the reason why it should be considered a major source for the new forms of fiction that were to be written on our continent in the following decades.

Gaspar Ilóm

The first chapter tells how Gaspar Ilóm, the chief of the lands of Ilóm, begins a war against those who plant corn for commercial reasons. Señor Tomás Machojón, instigated by his wife, poisons the chief, and the latter, abandoned by his wife, la Piojosa Grande, drinks the river to pacify his guts, thus saving himself. But he gains nothing thereby, since Colonel Chalo Godoy has taken advantage of his absence to kill the Indian fighters. Gaspar throws himself into the river so as not to have to survive his warriors.

This action must be deciphered by the reader, who will find himself submerged in a buzzing swarm of words that float dream-like between the real and the fictional. One must interpret, break the linguistic spells, and uncover within that flowing cavern the profile of a meaning. This narrative method serves to indicate that we are confronting a moment, at the beginning of the book, in which dream and reality cohabit, in which the mythic is still fully incarnate in man, in which the human and the natural worlds are interchangeable.

Using certain magical, iterative formulas, the "ground" tries to awaken Gaspar Ilóm, who is sleeping, buried, "unable to break away from a snake of six hundred thousand twists of mud, moonlight, forests, springs, birds and echoes which he felt around his body." The earth "falls dreaming," but he cannot go on sleeping because there is no shade, no vegetation, "he awakens among what were once mountains, but are now the bare hills of Ilóm"; it (the earth) has been violated, snatched from its natural, sacred, state, thus making impossible the magical union of man and nature, the primordial link that is possible in a prelogical, unreal stage,

where everything sleeps and everything dreams, not like now, a present in which there exists "corn-growing land filled with stagnant water from being awake so much." Provoked by the action of the corn growers who burn the vegetation in order to be able to grow corn for sale, offended by the destruction of her shade-filled forests which are converted into useless gold, desperately needing to go back to sleep and to make magic, nature orders Gaspar Ilóm to destroy the sowers, to install a symmetry of retribution, doing to them what they have done to the earth: "chop out the eyebrows of those who put axe to trees, burn the eyelids of those who burn the forest and freeze the bodies of those who stop the water." The cleansing from evil is proclaimed, and the return to balance, and revenge upon those who have separated man from nature. This loss of origin, a theme that runs throughout Asturias's work, necessarily brings oppression and exploitation in its wake, whether it comes from a local dictator, a Spanish conquistador, or the North American Empire. Corn "sown to be eaten is the sacred nourishment of man, who was made of corn. Sown for business it is the hunger of man who was made of corn." There are two types of men of maize, those who live in the magical plenitude of a sensual continuity with nature, the forms of a dream, of a sleep, and those who live in wakefulness, hunger, and death. The latter are uprooted, lose their roots, not only in a metaphorical sense, but also really and literally, becoming vagabonds upon the earth, deniers of the sacred vegetable growth. Therefore, the picaresque is ever-present in all of Asturias's production and in this work in particular: the directionless wandering in search of food, the absurd pilgrimage, a wind which passes again and again and brings ruin, which "will diminish the land and the corn grower will leave, taking his seed elsewhere, until he himself is finished, like a faded ear of corn in the midst of rich lands," with the nostalgia of rest in the wind of his eyes, the memory of the primal immobility that Gaspar Ilóm imitated and that is the equivalent of the lost paradise. As we shall see later, the novel is a tense dialogue between both kinds of men of maize, those who live the exile of never finding rest and those who become fixed in myth.

In his struggle, Gaspar has the aid of cosmic forces, the yellow rabbits for whom "there is no secret, no danger, no distance," the spirit of the fire which does battle beyond the death of the

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chieftain himself and is an emanation of the natural order seeking permanence in its being. Everything that refers to Gaspar is seen through whiffs of apparent chaos, which vibrate nevertheless with the secret vertebration of ritual. The exaggerated language, its serpentine, baroque syntax, a world that slithers forward like a snake, the union of dissimilar elements, transfiguration by means of the word, sacred, solemn, and distant, the inner vision of what is happening: it all produces in the reader's mind the process of enveloping primitivism that the character himself is living, and forces the leveling of dream and reality, leading the reader to mix fiction and fact without being able or wanting to separate them.² The main theme of the novel, the relationship between myth and reality, has its narrative and linguistic correlation in this fusion, but it is only revealed fully in the first chapter, where the mythic impulse transfixes everything. The fact that legend and reality, word and deed, are the same experience for the reader and for the character, will contrast with the remaining chapters, where it is precisely the relationship between these dimensions, how near to or far from each other they are, that is made problematic.

Take the poisoning of Gaspar Ilóm, at the beginning of the novel. If we were to try to give a chronological or merely logical order to this chaotic moment (Gaspar is poisoned, the poison is made from two white roots, *la Piojosa Grande* flees), we would find two successive, and perhaps parallel, sequences which coincide in certain recurrences but whose linkage does not allow us to exactly place each event nor to impose any order upon that rush of images, prophecies, and foreshadowings. One of the two sequences (Which of the two? And what if it were both?) is a premonitory dream (or memory dream) of *la Piojosa Grande*. The repetition, once in dream, again in reality, without being able to define which is which, blurs and clouds the habitual way in which things occur in this world. The reader must simply absorb what happened, must interpret it, he or she suddenly transformed into a magician. What is dreamed and what is lived are inextricably bound together, and this means that any effort by the reader to order that world will falsify it and end up in failure. Just as his characters struggle against civilization and against cold, everyday reality, Asturias will in the rest of the work, albeit in a more subdued manner, continue to destroy all rational mentality, using,

although in a less exaggerated fashion, every viable means to make his language boil: tossing out time shifts, interweaving impersonal and subjective points of view, confusing colloquialisms and the thoughts of his characters with the supposed objectivity of actions, silencing men and personifying the animal and plant kingdoms, detaching all points of reference, sweeping away conventions. Fire, one of the protagonists of the novel, is also its formal principle: words are flames, they sputter, they refuse to be enclosed, they hop like gleaming yellow rabbits, they die down and then rise up again with an uncontrollable rhythm of revenge, the consummation by the fire-grandfather-son, punishment, and we have reached the second chapter which narrates how those who betrayed Gaspar Ilóm are punished.

Machojón

When the chief died, the witch doctors of the fireflies had foretold the death of all the poison carriers and of their children, indicating that “su semilla de girasol sea tierra de muerto en las entrañas de las mujeres . . .” (“their sunflower seed will be a dead man’s earth in the wombs of women . . .”). The curse begins to be fulfilled in the second chapter with the death of Señor Tomás and of his son Machojón, as also with that of Vaca Manuela.

The first to disappear is Machojón, who was on his way to ask for the hand of his girlfriend, Candelaria Reinoso, in marriage. No one knows what happened to him; only we, the readers, directly sense the supernatural wonder of his absorption by the fireflies, that fire that leaps from the words of the witch doctors: “From his hat behind his ears, along the collar of his embroidered shirt, down the sleeves of his jacket, along the hairy ridges of his hands and between his fingers, like a cold sweat the flickering gleam of the fireflies coursed, a light like the beginning of the world, in which everything was seen without any clear shape.”

Suddenly the rumor spreads that Machojón rides each time the land is burned off, just prior to the sowing of the corn. This version originates in the visit of a mysterious woman to Candelaria Reinoso. Everything indicates that the woman is a semi-imaginary creature: we do not know who she is nor where she comes from; she is referred to as “ghost woman”; another customer does not

see her; several times there is mention of her "teeth as white as lard" and "lard-like clothing," which is significant when we remember that it is precisely lard that Candelaria sells. What the woman affirms is also vague: "Yes, child, who would believe it, but the men who went out to burn off the land saw Don Macho mounted on his horse among the flames; they say he was dressed in gold." Lost in the gossip of others, anonymous, unknown, coincidental with what the narrator has already revealed, the legend of Machojón is born into reality. Immediately, "Candelaria Reinoso closed her eyes and dreamed or saw that Machojón was riding his wild stallion down from the top of the hill they were burning . . ." We are left in suspense as to whether she actually saw him or dreamed him.

In her turn Candelaria will transmit what she has heard, or what she has desired, or what she has imagined, to Señor Tomás, who will begin to give up lands for clearing, just to see his son who "appeared in the middle of the best fires, riding his stallion, bathed in gold . . . his spurs sparkling like stars and his eyes gleaming like suns." Señor Tomás consolidates the legend, trying to provoke the presence of the supernatural, while the corn growers take advantage of his weakness, since it is in their interest to obtain lands for their seed "without any formal arrangement"; they feed his madness, assuring him they have seen Machojón galloping among the flames, repeating the same words already on everyone's lips. Thus, this legend, which is of human origin and which has been invented out of the daily needs of each man and woman, will increase the action of the fire, more and more, until the night arrives when Señor Tomás, hearing the truth from the mouths of the children and the fools (who make fun of the story and transform Machojón into a scarecrow), decides to disguise himself as Machojón and imitates the appearance of his son as it is described in the popular tale; he sets fire to the dry corn field "in order to ride among the flames mounted on his stallion so they would believe he was Machojón." He wants that golden Machojón to exist (despite the fact that he cannot see him, he knows that he is real), and he wants the corn planters (who say they can see him, but do not believe in his reality) to be his witnesses. In a little while the fire spreads, the tone of the first chapter returns; Señor Tomás's fire becomes the mythic flame of the fireflies, the avenger who flows from the

words of the witch doctors: "An immense firefly, as immense as the plains and the hills." First it is said that it is "like (igual a) the ears of yellow rabbits, in pairs, by the hundreds, baskets full of yellow rabbits, fleeing the fire, a round beast that was all face, no neck, a face rolling on the ground, a leathery-faced beast with an angry eye, among the heavy brow and the thick beard of the smoke." From the comparison "like" he goes to the metaphor and from there to the full and real narrated presence of the yellow rabbits, the mythological element: "the ears of the yellow rabbits moved among the sandy, deep-water streams without being extinguished." Thus, in one simultaneous instant, men create an action (setting a fire) and effectively provoke another (the revenge of the yellow rabbits); they are the servants of the fire and of the legend that has become reality. The origin of the fire and of the myth is found in human actions, but it has its foundation, its *raison d'être*, in the magical world, in the fulfillment of a curse. Señor Tomás, the corn planters, and also Vaca Manuela, are consumed by the fire that they themselves set, which is at the same time the cosmic fire punishing their betrayal.

It comes from Gaspar Ilóm who "had managed to hurl the lasso of his word around the fire that wandered freely in the mountains of Ilóm, and then to take it home and tie it up in his house, so that it wouldn't destroy all the trees, so it wouldn't work in collusion with the corn planters and merchants." The Indian's death means freedom for the fire, because "fire is like water when it is spilled. There is no way to hold them back." Men are transformed into "little fingers of a dark will that struggles, after millenia, to free the captive of the white hummingbird, prisoner of the man in the rock and in the eye of the grain of corn," the fire that sleeps there, ready to burst forth: "the captive can escape from the guts of the earth, into the heat and the light of the clearing fire and of war." When there is war (men destroy men) or there is clearing of land (men destroy earth), fire can escape, infected by human action, aided by the gestures of those beings who, without understanding the unlimited mythic power of their instrument, use it for their own ends, freeing the great, universal fire that seeks to wander free and destroy. "Its prison is fragile, and if the fire escapes, what brave, virile soul can struggle against it, when all flee in terror?" Therefore, because it is magical, only the *word* could

bind the fire "so that it could do no damage." The supernatural cannot intervene arbitrarily; it must be invoked from the world of the human; it must originate in everyday events, just like the legend, that has its origin in small human words, and becomes gigantic because once man has hurled it out it begins to grow, to swell, on its own account. Myth, like fire, is held by fragile bonds, and it only requires a tiny spark to produce the final conflagration, a single word in an unknown mouth, a nothing that speaks, so that a story goes out victoriously to move around the world and take over reality. The words of the witch doctors are fulfilled. The legend of Machojón ends up being real, creating a fire, provoking an imitation that leads to the desired revenge.

It has been affirmed that Asturias's fundamental theme is freedom.³ It seems to me, on the contrary, that what most concerns him is tyranny, alienation, the grotesque presence of punishment, in any of its forms, in a decaying world. Dictatorship, which in *El Señor Presidente* manifested itself in the political realm, is now a dictatorship of fire and of the word, but always a tyranny that men themselves ask for, adore, and help to build. Just as el señor Presidente can exercise his mandate because he is sustained by fear and by the conscious or involuntary support of others, the legend is able to impose itself upon reality because men live it fully as a way to make sense of their humanity, and thus the cosmic fire can break out because men concur with its effort and thus free it. The "little human bundles" of Asturias's world end up destroying themselves, being disintegrated by the very forces they themselves released or supplanted by the words they themselves spoke. This tyranny of language perversely parallels the political oppression which is omnipresent in Asturias's world. Magic and the law both are born in that primitive universe from an original curse, an order which men cannot deny. The phantom of inhuman powers entangling mankind runs throughout Asturias's work, from *El alhaja-dito* to the victimization suffered by the characters in *Tierrapaulita*, that magical and Pantagruelian dominion of *Mulata de Tal*. The consolation which Asturias leaves us is that human beings are responsible for their own condition.

And the revenge goes on.

The Deer of the Seven Clearing Fires

The brothers Tecún kill all the Zacatón family. Ostensibly, they do so to put an end to the spell by which the Zacatóns have harmed Señora Yuca, by "putting a cricket in her navel"; but in reality it is a matter of punishing the Zacatóns for having been the pharmacists who sold the poison used against Gaspar, as we will learn in the last chapter. Once again, a supernatural action is channeled through human hands. In order to discover who had caused the damage, according to the healer, the brothers needed "a fire of living trees so that the night would have a tail of fresh flames, the tail of a yellow rabbit," and we can guess that the Tecún will be the voice of the fire, the instrument of revenge: "The healer wedged himself in the doorway, bathed in crickets, a thousand tiny hiccups outside that answered the sick woman's hiccuping inside, and there he counted the fleeting stars, the yellow rabbits of the witch doctors who lived in the hide of virgin deer, those who offered and took away eyelashes of breath from the eyes of the soul." The hiccups and the crickets that the mother of the Tecúns has are, in fact, a part of nature, provoked by the healer in conjunction with the yellow rabbits. And the decapitated heads of the Zacatóns will be burned, consumed by the words, the verbal flames, of the witch doctors: "The flames, with the scent of human blood, stretched out, slipping away in fear, then they crouched for the attack, like golden tigers."

As a second part of the chapter we have the narrative of the death of the deer of the seven clearing fires, who in reality is the healer himself. It is the start of the theme of animal and man as a single entity: "They were one. The healer and the deer of the seven clearing fires, like you and your shadow, like you and your soul, like you and your breath."

But there is another focus of interest in this brief chapter. Seven years have already passed since Gaspar's death. Asturias has slowly distanced us from that moment, opening up a breach of time which will permit the creation of a legend. The entire book is full of dialogues in which the past is discussed and an event is ritualized as a way of molding its linguistic permanence. At times this event, already witnessed by the reader, is repeated just as it was before, word for word, narrating once again what happened. At other

times, the exchange that comments on this previous event gradually deforms it, changing its meaning. In any case, the thrust of these dialogues is clear: the legend is created not just in its founding moment, in human action, but also in its transmission, which will determine what can be forgotten and what remembered of that instant.⁴ As the pages unfold, intermingled with the life of the men of maize, stitched into imperceptible time, the myth gradually becomes residual, it becomes dynamic in the present and the future, it is remade, slipping into the future. And it is this presence of time, this basic dimension of all current Latin American narrative, which is going to change the interrelationship, distance and nearness, between myth and reality. For Asturias, time passes in the essential site where man becomes man, the fount of all lies and of all knowledge, the place where imagination and history touch: language.⁵

Colonel Chalo Godoy

In that world populated by sayings, by "the whys and wherefores of ancient speech," by events in process of becoming memories, the words of the witch doctors weigh ever more upon the memory of the last recipient of the curse, Colonel Chalo Godoy. During the entire horseback ride on the last day of his life, the light is playing with him, slowly surrounding him with signs of his approaching disappearance, worms of fire, "splendor of chaos," that he does not know how to interpret, until he is burned alive.

The way in which his death is narrated is striking and indicates another step in the evolution of the myth and of reality. We never see Godoy's agony as an objective fact; we are never sure how it happened; we are not supported by the omniscient knowledge of the narrator, who refuses to describe that death, surrendering his voice to one of his characters, Benito Ramos, who, because he has made a pact with the Devil, has the necessary prophetic gifts to tell us, even though he is far from the events themselves, how the Colonel died (or how he is dying at that moment, far from the place where Benito is riding). That event, at least in so far as we are concerned, never exists except in Ramos's words. The event becomes memory before it happens; it is an echo before it is a voice; and a legend before it is reality. The fantastic element, as it be-

comes more distant from its mythological origins with the passage of the years, fading into a post-arcadian world, becomes plausible, a full and integral part of reality, constructed from the perspective of a character. Immersed in everyday events, exiled from the realm of the magical, but still able to invoke its presence, the men of maize shape the legendary sphere that is always with them, as a continuous creation.

Through his version, Benito turns out to be a collaborator in the act of revenge. Those events could have originated in any of a number of human events that are mentioned, as if in passing, with hardly any attention given to them: Godoy's cigar was lit, the Tecúns trapped the Colonel and burned the forest where he took refuge, and many years—many pages—later we will learn: "In the report which the government made it said only that Colonel Godoy and his troops, while returning from an investigation, died in a forest fire."

And once again the fire is the center of the revenge, the element that unites reality and fiction: one of the circles that surrounds the Colonel and kills him "looks like a boiling pot, and is formed by an uncountable number of bear grass rounds of daggers made bloody by a fire . . . Their bodies are formed of fireflies and therefore, in the winter, they are everywhere, flickering their existence on and off." It is the seventh clearing, the epoch prophesied for Godoy's death: "and the seventh . . . will be of the fire of the golden owl which hurls owls from the depths of the pupils of its eyes." And this fire, creating a myth of itself from the inner eyes of man, from the tongues that slip like smoke and embers around its essence, is simultaneously the same fire with which the land was burned, the fire that was and is used to destroy and to make commerce, revenge of the fire that was the death of the land and now is the death of the man who betrayed Gaspar: "nevertheless, the smell was now that of fire in the air, the fire for clearing the land, for burning off the forest." This death is even more ironic when we realize that the Colonel was playing with the fire: "Fighting with guerrillas—he said a few moments before dying—is like playing with fire, and if I could do Gaspar Ilóm in, it was because from the time I was a child I learned to jump over fires, on St. John's Eve and the Eve of Immaculate Conception." His death coincides with the momentary resurrection of the healer, whose presence is nec-

essary for the deadly fire to begin: "I revived and only to get rid of the one who had also reached his seventh fire." The fire is identified with time, it becomes ubiquitous, an element by which one measures life: instead of years, clearing fires.

The first four chapters, therefore, demonstrate an evident cohesion, unfolding around Gaspar Ilóm's death and the revenge taken upon his executioners, a punishment that is carried out by human hands for superhuman reasons, a destruction that is at one and the same time reality and legend. The passage of time will allow each episode to be consolidated in a story, made myth for every succeeding generation. The fifth chapter, nevertheless, seems to escape this unity. Called a jewel within itself, it has been repeatedly affirmed that we are dealing with an independent episode, bearing no organic relationship with the rest of the book.

María Tecún

At first glance it would seem that the critics are right. What possible relationship between what precedes it and this story of the blind Goyo Yic, who recovers his sight in order to be able to find María Tecún, the woman who has abandoned him? Only vague threads of plot unite this episode with the four preceding ones; it seems to unfold in another period of time, almost in another geographic space.⁶

Nevertheless, this story is essential to the profound development of the book. In fact, the chapter narrates a process of forgetting, the progressive loss of a woman along the pathways of memory.

The herb seller operates on Goyo Yic so that he can undertake the search for María Tecún; but when he recovers colors and shapes and distances and light, he realizes that "his eyes were useless to him," because María Tecún was his "rubber plant blossom . . . a blossom invisible to the eyes that see outside but not within, flower and fruit of his closed eyes, in his loving darkness that was sound, blood, sweat, escape, a vertebral jolt," and the everyday world, which comes in through the eyes, substitutes his inner, imaginative vision, his original relationship with that woman who abandoned him. He had created her within himself, in the conjunction of all his senses; as he becomes more like all

other men, he loses that experience that had connected him with María Tecún.⁷ We see how he involuntarily betrays that real image, how as the days slip by, he loses his connection with that first vision, the one he had when he was still blind, when his world was still created like a ghostly but secure dream. "He was searching for María Tecún, but in the remotest depths of his consciousness he no longer looked for her. He had lost her."

One night he sees his shadow in the moonlight. It is the shadow of a *tacuatztín*, "with a pouch in front in which to carry its offspring," his *nahual*, his protector animal, but more than that, it is his guardian essence, the fundamental aspect of his magnified soul, in animal form. Just as the deer for the healer, the *tacuatztín* is Goyo Yic's double, and the dominant passion of his personality: "You know that human beings carry their young in pouches like the *tacuatztín*." This little animal, which accompanies him everywhere, is the symbol of his need to find María Tecún and his children, so much so that "Goyo Yic was known more by the nickname *Tacuatztín* than by his own name." But when he has sexual relations with another woman, the *tacuatztín* disappears, along with the possibility of finding his wife in spite of having lost the Amate flower: "The Amate flower, transformed into a *tacuatztín*, had just left its empty fruit, escaping so that the blind man would no longer see it, just as he could not see María Tecún, the blind man who was now seeing other women. A truly beloved woman cannot be seen; she is the Amate flower, seen only by blind men, the flower of the blind, of those blinded by love and by faith, of those blinded by life." After the flight of his guardian animal, Goyo Yic wanders the land, falling into a state of oblivion tinged by memories, like doves in the smoke: "Only when he heard other women's voices did Goyo Yic remember that he was looking for María Tecún. Finally he didn't think about her much at all. He did think of her, but not as before, and not because that was his intent, but simply because . . . he wasn't thinking." It is time which is digging a pit between the woman and his memory: "He was gradually shrunken, to the point where there was almost nothing left, by the years and the grief that hangs a man without a rope, but hangs him nonetheless, and by the bad climates in which he had been living, in his wanderings, searching all the towns and villages along the coast, and from drinking so much liquor to raise his spirits a little and to