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Miguel Angel Asturias's archeology of return



René Prieto

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICAN
AND IBERIAN LITERATURE 7

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Miguel Angel Asturias (1899–1974) is one of the notable literary figures in Latin America who in the 1920s contrived both to explore and define Latin American literature within the mainstream of Western history. He managed to be poetic, political, and mythological at the same time, with a degree of synthesis rarely achieved then or since. As is the case with many Latin American writers, his work is inextricably linked with politics, and he lived in exile for many years. He was influenced by Indian mythology, fantasy, and surrealism and was the first Latin American novelist to understand the implications of anthropology and structural linguistics for culture and fiction. In 1967, Asturias became the first Latin American novelist to win the Nobel Prize in literature.

René Prieto examines how Miguel Angel Asturias turned to the cultural traditions of the ancient Maya and combined them with the rhetoric of surrealism in order to produce three highly complex and widely misunderstood masterpieces: the *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1930), *Hombres de maíz* (1949), and *Mulata de tal* (1963). Asturias was the first American author to succeed in portraying an indigenous world vision that is truly non-Western. Borrowing a variety of techniques from pre-Columbian manuscripts, he created a new type of literature that is still the best example of the cultural blend typifying the Americas. This is the first book to examine these three novels in terms of their composition beyond the usual political readings normally attributed to them.

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To kawa and leps

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page ix
Introduction	1
1 The tales that now no one believes: <i>Leyendas de Guatemala</i>	16
The first steps	17
Mythmaker	22
Proteus in the streets of Paris	27
Making “fabula rasa” of surrealism	33
The birth of <i>neo-Indigenismo</i>	37
Tropical anamorphosis	42
Resolution as solution	64
The sifting of ancient times	66
2 Becoming ants after the harvest: <i>Hombres de maíz</i>	85
Sinbad sails home	85
A unifying principle	90
Burning water	98
Opossum’s dawn	104
Uneven Eve	108
Coyote’s covenant	123
Tall tales made to order	127
A new American idiom	138
The role of animals	141
Numbers	150
Colors	154
3 If all the dead began to walk, the earth would be full of steps: <i>Mulata de tal</i>	161
The short-lived republic of “bread, land, and freedom”	162
After the fall	166
The devil bearing gifts	169
The transgressive power of eroticism	183
Money doesn’t smell	196
The world upside down	213
In praise of folly	227

Conclusion: From death unto life	238
<i>Notes</i>	255
<i>Bibliography</i>	285
<i>Index</i>	295

Acknowledgments

As is the case with most books, this one developed in directions that were unforeseeable in the beginning. Like a tree in a garden, it came to have a life of its own, sprouting branches in unlikely places. I watered, trimmed, and tended it, but was not alone in making it grow.

During many unforgettable months at the *École des Hautes Études*, Roland Barthes shed light on the kind of methodology that would ultimately allow me to unravel the arcane mysteries of the *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata de tal*. It was he who convinced me of Greimas's relevance to my own research, who suggested I attend Lacan's seminar, who introduced me to Severo Sarduy. Sarduy, in turn, lent a critical ear to my enthusiastic ravings about Asturias, never failing to inject a note of humor into what might otherwise have been stuffy overebullience.

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in order to work with the just then made public Asturias manuscript collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale. I wish to thank the staff of the Rare Book and Manuscript Room of the Bibliothèque and, in particular, Aline Janquart and Marie-Françoise Bonnet for their assistance and helpful guidance.

While in Paris, Asturias's widow, Doña Blanca Mora y Araujo, spoke to me at length about Marc Cheymol's seminal book on Asturias and arranged for us to meet. Later, Cheymol made it possible for me to visit Amos Segala. The first chapter of this book could not have been written without the many helpful insights these critics shared with me.

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Once I felt sufficiently conversant with Mayan culture to begin unraveling the threads leading from Asturias's labyrinth, the task of finding the author's structuring principles began. Slowly but surely I began to discover clues that would eventually shed light on the orchestration of his *neo-Indigenista* fiction. A handful of friends and colleagues watched the manuscript grow from this point onward, believed in it, and encouraged me to continue. First and foremost, I wish to thank Professor Enrique Pupo-Walker for imparting inspiration and confidence each step of the way and always pointing me in the right direction. Among the many others who assisted in the difficult task of delivery, I want to thank most especially Gustavo Pellón, Roberto González Echevarría, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Karen Stolley, Ronald Rucker, Fleur Laslocky, and the Reference staff of the Middlebury College library and of SMU for their supportive approval and insightful comments.

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Introduction

Miguel Angel Asturias is unique among authors of note for having his most flamboyant writings overshadow his best. He basks in the limelight for all the wrong reasons, undeservedly deprived of all rightful recognition by the extravagance of his own originality. To compound matters, and in spite of all appearances to the contrary, he is among the most persistent saboteurs of the tribute he merits. I say this because he always maintained that the one and only function of a Latin American author was to unveil the political reality of his country. But to reveal this reality the author must teach, an activity that, by definition, demands reaching a public and, above all, being understood by that public. And yet, Asturias wrote a number of formidable *neo-Indigenista* works in which, missionary fervor and didactic intention notwithstanding, he avowedly made “no concessions” to the reader (Harss, 110). This is so true, in fact, that these works – the *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1930), *Hombres de maíz* (1949), *Mulata de tal* (1963), *Clarivigilia primaveral* (1965), *Maladrón* (1969), and *Tres de cuatro soles* (1971) – remain misunderstood to this day.¹

By limiting the activity of the Latin American author to a more or less compelling form of proselytism, Asturias slights by implication artists unencumbered with social responsibility whose writing responds exclusively to the calling of their own inspiration. In other words, he implicitly ties a noose around the neck of his own hermetic *neo-Indigenista* fiction and casts with his own hands the mold of catechizing author that he has been burdened with ever since. No one denies that the author of *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal* saw himself as a catechizer, of course, but it is high time we recognize that there is much more to him than tedious sermonizing.

One of the staunchest proponents of literary renewal in Latin America, Miguel Angel Asturias is best known for his bracing homilies – *El señor presidente* (1946), *Week-end in Guatemala* (1956), *Viento fuerte* (1950), *El papa verde* (1954), and *Los ojos de los enterrados* (1960). Easier to approach and understand, his more flagrantly political novels (I say “more” because all of Asturias’s fiction is in some ways political) have been perceived as representative of an author who wrote in two very different styles. As Emir Rodríguez Monegal so knowingly puts it, in his choice of themes and political commitment Asturias can be grouped among the authors of the *novela de la tierra* and yet, “because of his interest in matters of language and of his poetic temperament . . . [he] . . . is not distinguishable from the most important authors of his generation: Borges, Leopoldo Marechal, Agustín Yáñez” (“Los dos Asturias,” 13).

To take up where Monegal leaves off, we could add that the author of *Viento fuerte* wrote *novelas de la tierra* with a twist, but a twist that makes them seem like no other work written before or since. For this reason, I wouldn’t compare him to “the most important authors of his generation” but, rather, to a very reduced number of genial inventors like Macedonio Fernández, José Lezama Lima, and Fernando del Paso, authors who neither prefigure a literary tendency nor take part in a movement or school. Like them, Asturias is a star that shines alone: the sole exponent of a unique language.

Be that as it may, we must be quick to recognize that even the brightest of stars can have a few dull points, a fact that need not affect their place in the firmament, however. The same spirited and wholly original author of the *Leyendas* saw fit to bend his inspiration to the service of social and political causes. He was always an artist, it is true, but unfortunately not always an inspired one. As I have indicated, and like most *Indigenista* authors, he wrote in order to evangelize, a task that led him to indulge in both stock phraseology and fustian wordplay. His classic *El señor presidente* (1946) is one such example of overdoing to the point of saturation. Today, more than half a century after it was conceived, this best-selling novel seems both forced and brilliant, weighed down with cumbersome platitudes and yet brimming with original passages. Sadly, it does not age well, and parts of it read more like a second-rate melo-

drama than a lasting panegyric to the victims of totalitarianism; like *Week-end in Guatemala* and the Banana trilogy, it is laden with propaganda to the point of becoming pleonastic.

Once this tendency to be overly prodigal in his intent to catechize is recognized, no one who is familiar with the works of Asturias can fail to admit that at least three of them – the *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata de tal* – deserve to be included among the masterpieces of Latin American literature. And yet, curiously and regrettably, often they are not. The most obvious reason why these experimental works continue to be shrouded in a veil of smoke is simply that Asturias's "sociopolitical" novels (even though a misnomer, this label is a useful one for the time being) are also his most accessible. The *neo-Indigenista* fiction is no less political but much less mimetic and its meaning more puzzling as a consequence than, say, for example, *El señor presidente*. Elements from Mayan mythology enter into the composition of both types of literary works, but in the case of the *neo-Indigenista* fiction and of this fiction alone, truths or generalizations about human existence are expressed by means of symbolic figures and actions borrowed from folktales and pre-Columbian literature. In other words, intertextuality becomes the basic ingredient that the critic needs to address in unraveling the *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz*, *Mulata de tal*, *Clarivigilia primaveral*, *Maladrón*, and *Tres de cuatro soles*. In addition, because *El señor presidente* and the Banana trilogy are independently meaningful – they make sense as self-contained units – they are more often read and more often understood, whereas the *neo-Indigenista* fiction (which requires a certain familiarity with Mayan mythology and the rhetoric of surrealism) is tackled by few critics and seldom, if ever, by the general public.

Another important issue to keep in mind in trying to understand the curious destiny of Asturias's literary production is that all his best-known works appeared in print before the literary "Boom" in Latin America. Arguably, the 1940s and '50s was a less sophisticated period in terms of both literary production and the expectations of the Latin American reading public. There are always exceptions to this rule, of course, but I am referring to general trends. In the "pre-Boom" era, the expected and understood literary vehicle was mimetic in nature

and political in emphasis. The *novela de la tierra* had conditioned Latin American readers to expect a binary structure, a scenario of struggle, and a theme of social reform. All of these ingredients are abundantly present in Asturias's writing, of course, which meant that it was always well received, with the exception of *Hombres de maíz* (cf., for instance, Seymour Menton's *Historia crítica*, 221–22, and J. A. Galaos's "Los dos ojos," 131–34). Asturias not only responded to the canons of quality of the period; he was also seen as advancing the cause of "modernity" with the surrealist-inspired envelope in which he wrapped long passages from many of his works and all of the *Leyendas*. This collection of short stories was particularly regarded as a phenomenon when it was first published and admired for the brilliance of its lexical and imagistic apparatus. But if the truth be known, it has seldom been studied in terms of its content and, therefore, of its message. Today, sixty years after its publication, there are no more than four or five articles in print that attempt in any way to come to terms with what Asturias was actually *saying* in that obscure, half-forgotten, little book.

Then, in the early 1960s, the Boom takes Latin America by storm. The market is suddenly flooded with innovative writing styles and formats coming from every country south of the Rio Grande. Intertextuality becomes à la page. So do structuralism—, nouveau roman—, and *Tel Quel*—inspired novels (Severo Sarduy's *Cobra*, Salvador Elizondo's *Farabeuf*, Nestor Sánchez's *Siberia Blues*, to name three among the most obvious examples). By the booming sixties, surrealism has begun to seem more than a trifle outmoded; and soon enough, Asturias's linguistic fireworks in the opening pages of *El señor presidente* begin to be regarded as just that: fireworks (it would be more accurate, perhaps, to call them *fuegos artificiales*) – bright, but ephemeral. Clearly, the once acclaimed sociopolitical novels cannot begin to compare, in terms of versatility or skill, to the sheer virtuosity of works like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Three Trapped Tigers*, or *Cobra*.

On the other hand, the *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal* not only can be compared, they are – and from today's perspective – among the most forward-looking experiments in the history of Latin American fiction. However,

given the problem of screening or interference alluded to earlier between the accessible sociopolitical fiction and the arcane *neo-Indigenista* works, very few people had read the latter at the time when Latin American literature became the most innovative in the world; instead, everyone had been too busy attending to *El señor presidente*. Those rare critics who were familiar with Asturias's entire production (people like Jean Cassou and Ariel Dorfman) were neither ready nor willing to examine the historical, sociological, and anthropological background that informs his *neo-Indigenista* fiction by the time the floodgates of the Boom opened up. They sensed that *Hombres de maíz* was extraordinary, but no one took the steps necessary to unravel its mysteries.

If we had a literature-loving sociologist like Pierre Bourdieu writing in Latin America, he would no doubt point out that all literary criticism up until the Boom was founded on what Paul Valéry liked to term, with typical irony, "idolatries littéraires" ("Poetry and Abstract Thought," 57). The kinds of hermeneutic approaches to the novel that we have all become familiar with since the 1960s were practically unknown in the heyday of Asturias's popularity. Anglo-American criticism fared no better in this respect, of course; for instance, Richard Ellman and Stephen Heath did not begin their pivotal work on Joyce until the 1970s and '80s. Needless to say, biographical and historical perspectives, let alone "idolatries" of any kind, are insufficient means to tackle novels as complex as *Ulysses* and *Hombres de maíz*, a fact that explains why both of their authors are better known by reputation than from direct familiarity with their published work.

The best any critic would do during the Boom was to suggest that Asturias was one of the forefathers of the ongoing literary revolution, and to indicate, very much in passing, that *Hombres de maíz* had been "influenced" by Mayan myth.² No one took pains to say in what manner until Ariel Dorfman wrote an insightful study entitled "*Hombres de maíz: el mito como tiempo y palabra*" in his *Imaginación y violencia en América* and Richard Callan published his controversial *Miguel Angel Asturias* in 1970. Until then, one of the voices responsible for spearheading the literary revolution was short of being forgotten barely a decade after having reached the peak of fame. Then, again,

perhaps the word “forgotten” is a bit exaggerated; people went on referring to Asturias, of course, but mostly to disparage his cliché-ridden melodramas (Fernando Alegría, for instance, speaks of the “provincial triteness” of the *Leyendas* in his *Literatura y revolución*, 54–55), or to mention in passing (and, often, without having read it) the arcane erudition of his *neo-Indigenista* fiction. A wholly original author had been laid to rest with the tarnished laurels he was awarded for his least inspired works and continued to go unrecognized for his truly major innovations in the art of fiction.

Not surprisingly, given his involvement and lifelong proclamations, the coup de grace that finally relegated Asturias to the shadows was of a political nature. In 1966, he accepted the post of Guatemalan ambassador to Paris, a decision that was much criticized by the Latin American leftist intelligentsia. Eventually, this decision brought a rift with García Márquez and deepened the already existing differences between Asturias and his longtime friend and companion in Paris, Luis Cardoza y Aragón.³ Accepting this new diplomatic responsibility from a government that was not viewed sympathetically by the liberals was in many ways the straw that broke the camel’s back (considering that the camel was already weighed down with Asturias’s ever problematic “surrender” “to the new Señor presidente, Jorge Ubico” and his unexplained posture at the time of Jacobo Arbenz’s downfall [Himmelblau, “Sociopolitical Views,” 79]).

When the dust is left to settle, it is obvious that however ambiguous the political posturings in his career might have been, Asturias is no less deserving of recognition as an artist. It is true that he didn’t voice his dissent against Jorge Ubico after his return from Paris, but then again, as Gerald Martin is quick to point out, he never sang praises to a tyrant as had Darío or Chocano (*O.C.*, IV, lvi). He kept his opinions to himself, even when he was forced to accept an appointment to the national congress (which Ubico cleverly extended in order to surround himself with men of social and intellectual prestige [Pilón, 49]). Regardless of the portentous interpretations that have been made of his actions in the past, today not even his worst enemies could find well-documented arguments to refute that Asturias was always true to his ideals.

Now that the obstacles that block the way to an accurate perception of Asturias's work have been outlined, the time has come to remove the most flagrant hurdle barring the way – the prejudice against his “trite pamphleteering” – and begin to read it anew. Much remains to be done to shed light on the wealth of material that has remained buried behind the stumbling block of the so-called sociopolitical novels. In fact, as critics far and wide have been decrying for decades, his best, and least, known works have yet to be “approached in a critical and systematic manner” (Alegría, “Miguel Angel Asturias,” 79).

In recent years, significant steps have been taken to remedy this omission. Since the 1970s and early '80s, a few critics, including Gerald Martin, Gordon Brotherston, Marc Cheymol, and Jack Himelblau, have turned away from the earlier emphasis on biographical studies and subjective evaluations and have begun to read Asturias's fiction from the well-documented perspective of Mayan anthropology. In addition, the publication of *Hombres de maíz* in the *Edición crítica de las obras completas* (1981), a work richly annotated and accompanied by a number of critical studies (among which Martin's book-length analysis stands out for its thoroughness and perspicuity), has come to rescue from oblivion Asturias's most complex work of fiction. So, too, Cheymol's 1987 carefully documented study of the author's early years in Paris has shed light on a number of insufficiently known episodes about Asturias's life and, most importantly, their effect on his developing artistic vision.

Coordinated by Amos Segala, *Miguel Angel Asturias. Paris 1924–1933. Periodismo y creación literaria*, a timely compilation of the author's journalism and early fiction written while in Paris and immediately upon his return to Guatemala, has joined the two earlier analyses. *Periodismo y creación* will do much to put in perspective the sharp wit and unforgiving eye of the avid convert to Mayan culture during his most formative years; it will also help to dispel the myth of the vague and rambling patriarch that emanates from the better known interviews (Couffon, Leal, Sáenz, López Alvarez, et al.), and restore Asturias's reputation as a shrewd and insightful student of literature and life.

My own work is both complementary and consequential to these three volumes, all produced under the tutelage of Segala.

I say that it is consequential because, to begin with, the biographical data for the years in Paris that Cheymol unearths and analyzes in *Miguel Angel Asturias dans le Paris des "années folles"* has allowed me to classify rightfully the *Leyendas* as a hymn to a newly grasped nationalism and sense of *latinidad* on the part of the author. Second, it is consequential because Martin's many contributions – bibliographical, historical, and hermeneutic – have been vital in helping me to complete my own structural analysis of the narrative and thematic structures in *Hombres de maíz*. Finally, *Periodismo y creación literaria* has permitted me to read the fiction against the background of historical, aesthetic, and emotional events that touched the young Asturias. I spent many months working directly with the articles now grouped in this volume in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, but the way they have been framed, introduced, and annotated under Segala's able coordination is not to be minimized.

What my own book contributes to the field of Asturian criticism is, I feel, likewise timely: an analysis of the three *neo-Indigenista* works that are generally acknowledged as being the most important in Asturias's career – *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata de tal*. It is true that I also could have included *Clarivigilia primaveral*, *Maladrón*, and *Tres de cuatro soles* in this study. However, the latter has already been the subject of an amply annotated edition with a very competent (if rather belabored) introduction by Dorita Nouhaud (*Miguel Angel Asturias. Edición crítica de las obras completas. Tres de cuatro soles* [Paris and Mexico: Klincksieck and Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977]). In addition, and despite their interest for specialists in the field, I did not judge the first two to be of the caliber of the chosen works, and I strongly feel that they should be the subject of a separate project.

Once I circumscribed the object of my study, I let each of the books I was working with dictate the approach to be used. As it turns out, the technique for reading and understanding each of them is different, but the actual methodology is comparable in many ways. In all three cases I started by dismantling the book in question in order to understand the principles of its composition. The works of A. J. Greimas and Vladimir Propp were a guiding inspiration in the very early stages of my research, but I soon realized that examining the narrative architecture of the

Leyendas, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata* was really more of a stepping-stone to the more important stages of deciphering and elucidation that were to follow.

The first phase of the research was both long and arduous; because chronological and character development are eroded in these three works by Asturias, I began by abstracting all redundant elements from the author's discourse in order to reveal the signs of topic progression. In other words, I considered only the narrative elements that further the plot line and temporarily set aside what Roman Jakobson would refer to as the "poetic" function of the text (*Questions de poétique*, 117). This allowed me to isolate what Greimas labels "actors" and "functions" from the discursive components and to examine how these are brought together into a coherent whole. The next step was to search for iterative elements forming clusters of meaning. My hypothesis was that when these elements were read syntagmatically, the narrative nexus between one discursive fragment and the ones that follow would become apparent. I would then be able to determine whether Asturias's novels and short stories lack unity, as many critics suggest, or whether this unity might not be based on criteria altogether different from those typically present in the Western literary tradition. As I expected, this turned out to be the case, most notably in *Hombres de maíz*.

In this unprecedented work of fiction a Spanish signifier refers not only to the corresponding Spanish concept but also to several coded elements borrowed from Mayan mythology. A word such as corn is linked to an animal, a color, a number, and a historical epoch, all of which are interrelated according to their attributed role in pre-Columbian mythology. What emerges as the very coherent plot is not one that develops chronologically or "ethically" – through its characters – but associatively – through complex networks of symbols that interlock to form the infrastructure of the novel.

Asturias's concept of unity was not my only query, however. For instance, when deciphering the *Leyendas*, I set out to explore his use of surrealist devices as well. Whenever this early collection is mentioned, critics never fail to call to account the influence of the French avant-garde movement of the 1920s on the work of the young author from Guatemala. But to what

extent was this true? And, if it was, in what way were the rhetorical and stylistic devices of the surrealists useful to the conception and realization of the *Leyendas*? Then, also, inasmuch as these are a palimpsest of fables, might there not be a moral teaching or practical lesson contained in each of them, in keeping with the Aesopian model? And, if there are conclusions of moral significance or perhaps even suggested modes of conduct to be learned from the seven legends comprising the 1930 edition, might they not be read as phrases in a melody? Wouldn't this possibility allow us, once and for all, to decipher the author's message?

Asturias's intentions were not as difficult to glean in his 1964 novel, *Mulata de tal*, as they were in the *Leyendas*. Reading this work simply demanded a completely different approach. It was plain that the political situation of his home country had played a large part in the conception of both *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata*. As Jack Himelblau argues, Asturias could never be tagged as a confirmed Marxist because he firmly believed "in the concept of individual property" ("Sociopolitical Views," 70). On the other hand, as early as 1929, in an article entitled "La mirada vigilante: nacionalismo económico," Asturias "shocked the Guatemalan public by asking that small peasant farms replace the large plantations owned by imperialist concerns" (Himelblau, "Sociopolitical Views," 70). The concept of small, peasant-owned farms that Asturias had advocated since his youth was to become a reality when the first two democratic governments Guatemala had in the twentieth century – under Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz – came into power. This same concept is dramatized in the epilogue to *Hombres de maíz*, when Goyo Yic and his family return to Pisigüilito and become small farmers.

Just as he had translated Arévalo's aims into his own work of fiction, Asturias chose to allegorize his bitter disappointment after the fall of Arbenz's government and the revocation of the agrarian reform law that Arbenz had implemented. This is why *Mulata* dramatizes the universal folktale of a peasant who trades his wife to the devil in exchange for wealth and ends as a holocaust that all but exterminates humankind. The characters' greed is meant to mirror that of Asturias's countrymen, who were capable, as he had feared and predicted so many

times before, of letting their feelings and emotions become contaminated with "gold, in the guise of money" ("Ojo nuevo," August 24, 1929, 3, in *Periodismo*, 374 [my translation]).

After his separation from his first wife, Clemencia Amado, in 1946 and his first long stay in Argentina as a diplomatic delegate, the author of *Mulata* had also become interested in psychoanalysis and even sought treatment in the (presumably) capable hands of the perversely named Simeón Falicoff (who would actually follow Asturias and his new wife to Paris and even share their apartment like some sort of Rasputinian overseer). Blanca Mora y Araujo has confirmed her husband's keen interest in the theories of both Freud and Jung, and I have had occasion to look at Asturias's own annotated copies of works by these authors.

Considering his reading interest in psychoanalysis and seeing it in conjunction with the rapid succession of tragedies that take place in the period immediately preceding the conception of *Mulata de tal* (tragedies that include separation and divorce from his first wife, temporary estrangement from his children, the death of his mother in 1948, violent political disappointment after the fall of Arbenz, and exile in Argentina), when the time came to decipher this novel, I could not help but view it as an allegory of rejection, an approach that proved to be most enlightening in view of the rampant sadism and the scatological fixation that are ubiquitous elements in the narration. Historical and personal upheavals, as well as a keen interest in psychoanalysis, turned out to be, therefore, seminal influences in the conception and realization of this much maligned masterpiece.

After breaking the coded message of the *Leyendas*, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata*, I began to consider the elements that tied all three books together. What struck me, above all, was the number of thematic consistencies they share, especially considering that thirty years, and many personal upheavals, separate the collection of folktales from the allegory on rejection. Among these consistencies, the one that is most conspicuous is Asturias's unflagging regard for the Indian. This obsession finds its roots in the author's personal history but also in the objectives he set for himself while still a student. He was mestizo on his mother's side and was raised by an Indian nurse (sufficiently

important in his life to figure in his play *Soluna* [1955]); as a child, he spent three years in Salamá, surrounded by Indian merchants, tradesmen, and muleteers; as a student in Paris, he acquired a respectable background in Mayan literature and civilization.

Whether for these reasons or for the more likely ones of a strong sense of intuition and fine qualities of observation, it is undeniable that he can be counted among the very few Latin American authors who have managed to penetrate the surface of Indian consciousness. And what is most telling is not that he was able to portray the Indian psyche as the jewel in the crown of some realistic novel or other (like his gifted Mexican colleague Rosario Castellanos) and leave it at that, but that he was so profoundly impregnated with the generative grammar of indigenous manuscripts, such as the *Popol Vuh* and the *Annals of the Xahil*, that he was able to harness Western techniques with stylistic and thematic elements from Indian literature to create the first major break in the Western hemisphere with the mimetic tradition that typifies European literature. For this achievement – certainly no mean task – he deserves better than to be viewed within the limiting and constricting confines of the *Indigenista* tradition and should be seen, instead, as a major force in the literary renewal of Latin America.

For this reason, likewise, this book should not be considered simply as a monograph on the work of a single author but beyond that, as an exegesis of the paragrammatic process that characterizes nonmimetic fiction. In that sense, *Miguel Angel Asturias's Archaeology of Return* could be said to be a vade mecum of possible approaches to the post-Joycean novel. But ultimately, above and beyond all other possible applications, this is a book that should be regarded as a passport, an open window to the writing of a man whose original contributions to the art of fiction have remained in the shadows far too long.

Shadows have not been the exclusive domain of Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* novels, moreover; the production of other authors associated with this movement has fared little better until very recently. The formulaic nature of most works of fiction depicting the Indians' struggle for land has deterred many readers from considering *neo-Indigenista* fiction as having any literary merit whatsoever. It is true that in recent years signif-

icant steps have been taken to correct this misperception and to look more closely at the achievements of the movement, in one country at least. Antonio Cornejo Polar's *Literatura y sociedad en el Perú: la novela indigenista* (1980), Julio Rodríguez-Luis's *Hermenéutica y praxis del indigenismo: la novela indigenista de Clorinda Matto a José María Arguedas* (1980), Angel Rama's *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982), and, more recently, Efraín Kristal's challenging *The Andes Viewed from the City: Literary and Political Discourse of the Indian in Peru (1848–1930)* (1987) take over where Concha Meléndez's seminal *La novela indigenista en Hispanoamérica, 1823–1899* (1934) leaves off.⁴

These four critics have done much to shed light on the difficult subject of *Indigenismo* in Peru and to dispel misconceptions regarding this literary movement as a whole. Kristal's book is particularly illuminating and debunks many an established notion; he leaves no doubt that *Aves sin nido* is not the foundational work of the *Indigenismo* (as Julio Rodríguez-Luis and Seymour Menton had suggested), and that the melodramatic plots of Peruvian *Indigenista* novels are always stalking horses upon which impassioned political discourse rides forth. In the opinion of this critic, the aim of this subgenre is not simply, as most readers would like to think, to restore human rights. The Indian in Peruvian literature is actually played as "a rhetorical pawn" in the debate between the landed oligarchy and sectors of the political and cultural intelligentsia; and what many believed to be humanistic tracts turn out to be yet another form of manipulation (Kristal, 27).

But how does the Indian fare in the literature published north of the isthmus? Up until now, works documenting the contribution of *Indigenismo* in this part of the world have been few and far between. A handful of important articles by Joseph Sommers, Martin Lienhard, Gabriella de Beer, and Marta Portal has given readers a glimpse of the extensive field simply waiting to be harvested, and Frances Dorward has completed a much needed manuscript about the literature of the *Indigenismo* in Mexico. But what about Guatemala? What about the work of Mario Monteforte Toledo and that of living authors, such as Arturo Arias, who live and write outside the republic? Much still needs to be said about the literature depicting the Indian in Mexico and Central America, especially when we

consider that the most original development in the movement – the transition from *Indigenismo* to *neo-Indigenismo* – has been masterfully nurtured by two authors from this area: Asturias and his neighbor to the north, Rosario Castellanos.

They, along with José María Arguedas and Manuel Scorza, have done the most to intertwine their fiction, written in Spanish, with the idioms, thought patterns, songs, and legends of the native cultures of America in order to create a literature that is mestizo to the same degree as the characters it portrays. Herein lies their greatness as well as their originality. Their brand of writing goes much beyond that of the *Indigenistas*, whose work both precedes and coincides with their own, because it fuses elements from indigenous literatures with rhetorical and stylistic devices typical of the Western literary tradition. This is why *neo-Indigenismo* should be viewed not merely as the most recent phase but also as the most mature and, stylistically speaking, most consummately conceived moment in the history of a trend that includes all literature portraying the Indian in Latin America.

The most distinguishing feature of *neo-Indigenismo* is that it allows the voice of the Indian to be heard – and not merely as a somewhat deformed echo of the white man's voice. Asturias's use of pivotal elements borrowed from Mayan mythology permits him to bring together past and present, tradition and the modern world, with a deftness that has not been fully recognized. And Rosario Castellanos's profound grasp of Indian consciousness as she draws the character of Catalina Díaz Puijlá in *Oficio de tinieblas* makes one ponder over one of J. C. Mariátegui's most often repeated beliefs. When the author of *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928) suggests that the literature of the *Indigenismo* cannot give us a strictly accurate version of the Indian because it is written by mestizos and whites, who view the culture from the outside, he was giving an accurate assessment of the *Indigenistas* who predated his own writing. But a lot has happened since 1928; and at least four writers have succeeded in moving beyond the narrow confines of the *Indigenista* novel and the superficial depiction of native Americans that characterizes this literature.

In studying the writings of José María Arguedas, Asturias, Castellanos, and Scorza, we can no longer limit ourselves to the

study of similarities, of generic features common to a movement. It is evident that, along with the *Indigenista* authors to whom they are often likened, these authors champion the cause of a disfranchised race. But beyond that, each develops a wholly original style and brings to bear a world vision that is distinctly not European. Which brings me to my next point: A rethinking of *neo-Indigenismo* can no longer be avoided for the very simple reason that no other movement in Hispanic literature presents in like manner the fusion of language and culture that is the very ethos of Latin America. Doesn't it stand to reason that a continent whose very essence is heterogeneity should produce a literary language in which a variety of cultural strains coexist without ever becoming fused – novels that, to quote Roberto González Echevarría, “explode under the pressure of their internal contradictions” (*Myth and archive*, 159)?

No one more than Asturias succeeds in moving beyond the stereotype of superficial realism that typifies the literature of *Indigenismo*. In fact, he is both of the movement and yet, as I have already suggested, a writer of such magnitude and originality that he transcends the confining parameters of any tightly circumscribed school or literary tendency. The *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata de tal* are works of such inventiveness and eccentricity that, ultimately, they defy all definition – or almost, for I truly believe they deserve to be ranked among the milestones of twentieth-century literature. I can only hope that my reading of them will contribute in some measure to bringing them out of the dark to which they have been unjustly consigned.

1

The tales that now no one believes: *Leyendas de Guatemala*

Si algo anda mal en el mundo, seguramente no es culpa mía. Yo no soy enemigo del bien. Lo que yo hago es burlarme de lo que toma la apariencia del bien sin ser el bien, de lo que toma la apariencia de la belleza sin ser la belleza. Porque yo les destruyo sus falsos ídolos, porque yo les he dado mis dos lampos de claridad, la duda y la risa, los hombres me maldicen.

Satan, in José Vasconcelos's *Prometeo vencedor* (30)

Hombres de carne, campesinos de carne luchan contra lo español, que en la época de la independencia significa lo espiritual, lo importado de Europa, lo tradicional, el Dios ajeno, el concepto ajeno de sociedad y de derecho.

Miguel Angel Asturias, "Las lanzas coloradas,"

El Imparcial, June 30, 1931

Make my guilt vanish,
Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth
do me a favor,
give me strength, give me courage
in my heart, in my head,
since you are my mountain and my plain;
may there be no falsehood and no stain,
and may this reading of the *Popol Vuh*
come out clear as dawn,
and may the sifting of ancient times
be complete in my heart, in my head;
and make my guilt vanish,
my grandmothers, grandfathers,
and however many souls of the dead there may be,
you who speak with the Heart of Sky and Earth,
may all of you together give strength
to the reading I have undertaken

Maya "daykeepers" prayer, quoted in
Dennis Tedlock's Preface to the *Popol Vuh*

The first steps

How does a middle-class law student from a moderately comfortable, half-mestizo family become a Nobel Prize author, diplomat, and defender of Indian rights? Where do lofty ideals, a unique writing talent, and sympathies for the Left spring from when one is neither wealthy enough to cultivate such ideals nor poor enough for natural empathy with the populist cause? Before looking at the highly unusual work created by this idealistic man of genius, it behooves us to consider his origins, the forces that influence him, and the astounding evolution that takes place in his thinking between the time he defends his doctoral dissertation, *El problema social del indio* (first published in 1923), and his first long work of fiction, the *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1930).¹ Only then will we be in a position to assess the real extent of his originality.

On his mother's side, Asturias's American lineage goes back before the Spanish arrive in the New World. On his father's side, it is much more recent. According to critic and biographer Jimena Sáenz, the first member of his family to appear in the public record, Sancho Alvarez de las Asturias, comes to Guatemala as captain general in the seventeenth century (*Genio y figura*, 16). By the beginning of the twentieth century, Don Sancho's heirs find themselves neatly divided into two camps, aristocrats and commoners, most of whom live in the old-fashioned neighborhood of La Parroquia, where Miguel Angel is born in 1899 (Sáenz, 16). His father, Ernesto Asturias, is a lawyer; his mother, María Rosales, a schoolteacher. Both are sufficiently liberal and single-minded to lose their jobs for the sake of upholding their beliefs, and this at a time when their son is barely four years old and the country is beginning to gasp for air in a noose ruthlessly tightened by dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera.

The events that would forever shape the life of the young Asturias begin to take place in 1903, when the medical students in the capital grow restless and stage a strike against the dictator. Apprehended, the ringleaders are sent before the district judge, Ernesto Asturias, who, in view of their age and the mildness of the offense, dismisses the case. For this, he is immediately called to task by the president and flatly informed that judges in his government are not at liberty to arbitrate. True to

a form soon to be recognized as egomaniacally typical, Estrada Cabrera sounds the trumpet: "There is no judicial power in this land," he snaps at the now disfranchised judge. "The only power here is mine" (quoted by López Alvarez, 43). Soon after his own dismissal, his wife, María Rosales, finds herself on the street. Strapped for money and worried about their own lives, they pack their belongings and set out for the town of Salamá where the future author's maternal grandfather, Colonel Gabino Gómez, opens the doors to his home.

They spend only three years in this isolated community, but the experience is in every way formative for the growing boy. What a contrast between the hustle and bustle of the capital and the bewitching atmosphere of Salamá, its dirt streets thronging with Indians and muleteers. The boy will also come in direct contact with Indian families when his grandfather leaves him in their shanties while he goes about his business, and his first games will include making clay figurines with the children whom he meets on these occasions (López Alvarez, 47).² In this sequestered nook of Baja Verapaz, the young Asturias will be cherished and indulged by two women who will greatly shape his attitude toward the world: his mother, to whom he will always remain deeply attached, and Lola Reyes, the Indian nanny who figures as Tomasa in the play *Soluna* (1955). From the lips of both the growing boy picks up the first bits and pieces of folktales that will become the basic elements of many of his writings.

The years spent in this rural backwater will also deeply impress one fact in his consciousness: the need to heal the "mal indio," that is, to better the deplorable conditions in which the native population of Guatemala lived and (in his way of thinking at the time) the way in which they hindered the country's progress because of their lack of hygiene and education. It cannot be said, however, that what would one day become a consuming interest – the struggle for Indian rights – was more than a subject of intellectual curiosity even at the time he wrote his doctoral dissertation.

For obvious reasons, the return to Guatemala City in 1906 brings with it a change of profession for Ernesto Asturias (he becomes a sugar and flour importer) and, at first, an orthodox Catholic education for his son. However, by the time Miguel

Angel begins *bachillerato* at the state-controlled Instituto Nacional Central de Varones, his parish school education is going to be superseded by a "liberal" approach that he himself will describe in later years as having been "like Juárez's liberalism in Mexico and Rufino Barrios's in Guatemala, that is to say, anti-catholic, anti-religious and anticlerical" (López Alvarez, 53-54). Asturias also tells López Alvarez that one of the first subjects he studies in the institute is logical positivism, a fact that explains his own attitude toward minorities when the time comes to write his dissertation.

The liberal education he receives in high school was to bear fruit in other ways as well; by the time Asturias enters the university in 1917, he is already pondering the need for social reform. After one year studying medicine (a field his father seems to have steered him toward), he transfers to law. Even this early in his career, he is looking for a forum from which to voice his dissent with government policy and to support the creation of a confederacy of Central American states. He finds both a training ground and a pulpit in the Unionista party and in *El Estudiante*, the most radical student newspaper in Guatemala at the time.

The Unionista platform calls for a federation of Central American states and gives as its target date September 15, 1921, the centenary of independence. Naturally, Estrada Cabrera, who had been in power since 1899, was vehemently opposed to a confederacy, which would, for all intents and purposes, herald his own demise. Not without a touch of poetic justice, this very opposition becomes the excuse for popular dissent against his regime and eventually forces him to resign. In other words, as López Alvarez suggests, "the overthrow of Estrada Cabrera comes about as a consequence of the development of a supranational consciousness in Central America" (103). We shall have occasion to see how this consciousness was to be another important ingredient in the rapidly developing national and cultural identity of the young law student.

By 1920, Asturias has also become a charter member of the Asociación General de Estudiantes Universitarios; as a representative of this organization, he travels to Honduras and El Salvador with the aim of cementing plans for the federation of states. That same year, the Universidad Popular, whose

self-designated mission was to educate the poor, is founded. Once again, Asturias is among the charter members. Many years later, when he was world-famous, he would declare about his student days in Guatemala, "The only political path we could follow was that of teaching"; certainly no one could deny that he remained devoted to education his entire life (quoted by López Alvarez, 112).

Sent as one of Guatemala's spokesmen to the International Student Congress called by José Vasconcelos, Asturias travels to Mexico in 1921. The trip turns out to be another godsend. Besides coming in contact with the soon-to-be-appointed minister of education, he meets key figures of the Ateneo de la Juventud, such as Carlos Pellicer and Jaime Torres Bodet; established authors (for instance, Valle Inclán, whose *Tirano banderas* would have such direct impact in the conception of his own *El señor presidente*); and diplomats (he is a guest in the house of Mexico's minister to Guatemala, Juan Bojórquez). It is evident that these contacts, made even more fruitful by the atmosphere of humanistic fervor at the Student Congress, will whet his appetite for both didactic writing and diplomacy in the years to come. The effect of this intellectual stimulation on the maturing law student cannot be underestimated in terms of his developing ideology either. The year 1921 was both the centenary of Mexico's independence and the tenth anniversary of the revolution. The young and still rather provincial Asturias is instructed and inspired during the many debates on social reform and feels particularly drawn to the outline for agrarian reform that is being bandied about with great zeal.

No doubt he was also tantalized by the theories set forth in Vasconcelos's *Prometeo vencedor* (1921). In this seminal treatise in the guise of a play, the future minister of education predicts the imminent fall of all dictatorships and calls for the birth of a "nueva humanidad." From Vasconcelos, Asturias borrows the theme of *mestizaje* and wields it as one of the main weapons in his own call to arms. This is why he argues so vehemently in his dissertation that only immigration and the mingling of bloods can regenerate the Indian: "The stagnation in which the Indian race finds itself, its immorality, its inactivity, its backward way of thinking," he writes, "originate in the lack of bloodlines that could vehemently thrust this race into the future" ([my

translation] 106). Social reforms must be brought to Guatemala but not before the "mal indio" has been studied and understood. After his having recognized this, the subject for his dissertation comes to him as a matter of course. Vasconcelos himself learns about Asturias's plan to conduct a "scientific" study of the Indian and encourages him in the enterprise.

What comes as a revelation to the modern reader is that this much exalted first work on the Indian reeks with the prejudices that typify Auguste Comte's positivism. Clearly, as biographer Jimena Sáenz observes, it is "a beginner's thesis" that is "sparsely documented," but I thoroughly disagree with her assertion that the young author doesn't reach any "clearly stated conclusions" in this document (30-31). It is plain to see, on the contrary, that the whole of *El problema social del indio* revolves around two emphatically stated articles of faith.

After decrying the squalor and decrepitude of the Indian, Asturias maintains that "all words fall short in giving a clear idea of his beastly existence" (110). Like Sarmiento before him, he argues in favor of foreign immigration, preferably carefully screened "specimens" from "Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Bavaria, Wittenberg and the Tirol" in order to improve the breed (110). Guatemala must be as careful about those it allows to enter the country as it is about those who are to be excluded from this forward-minded human laboratory. For instance, the Chinese are dismissed as a "degenerate and vicious breed whose sheer existence makes one vomit and whose aspirations are ludicrous" (108). With their "vices and racial shortcomings," Asturias argues, "they have come to give the coup de grace to our way of life." What Guatemala needs to do is follow the example of Argentina and the United States and turn toward Europe in search of "specimens that combine the right mixture of qualities" (110).

Shocking though it may be today, there is nothing unusual about this kind of racial harangue among up-to-date Latin American intellectuals of the 1920s. We don't need to look any further than Vasconcelos in search of sources arguing in favor of forging a better breed under controlled conditions. What is truly astounding is not that Asturias should set forth a racist polemic in an ostensibly progressive document, but that he should evolve away from this type of cant so rapidly and

drastically that, by 1930, merely six years after the completion of his dissertation, he has done a full turnabout regarding the Indian in his *Leyendas*. The question that comes to mind: What were the momentous changes that took place in the writer's life in the last half of the 1920s? What were the forces that radically altered his thinking and gave a new direction to his perception and understanding of autochthonous American cultures?

Mythmaker

One of the most admirable features of Asturias's character was his ability to conform to new surroundings. But this adaptability could also turn into a penchant for camouflage that was objectionable even to his closest friends. The truth is, he was such a spontaneous storyteller that he couldn't stop improvising. His own life was not merely the origin of his fables, it was itself a fable that ran concurrently with his work. Like Hilario Sacayón in *Hombres de maíz*, one could always say about Asturias: "He's got more affection for fiction than fact, he's a poet" (275).³

Marc Cheymol emphasizes this seldom recognized flair of the Guatemalan Proteus in his highly illuminating *Miguel Angel Asturias dans le Paris des "années folles,"* leaving no doubt that the longest-running legend Asturias ever wrote was his own biography. Indeed, after reading the often contradictory interviews recorded by Giuseppe Bellini, Jimena Sáenz, Luis Harss, and Luis López Alvarez, as well as going head-on with Asturias's hooded personal accounts, one must agree with Cheymol that this unfathomed author fully succeeded in creating a persona that is still opaque to modern readers (when he interviewed him in 1965, Luis Harss found him to be "monosyllabic" and "not a conversationalist." The Chilean critic further describes Asturias's technique for befuddling his interviewers as follows: "He likes to tell a good anecdote, a joke or an epigram and watch it float in the air while he sits back to meditate or changes tracks altogether" [my translation, *Los nuestros*, 88]).

Asturias's many travels, frequent exiles, and profound reticence to talk about himself or keep a diary have also contributed to the dearth of written biographical information. So we find ourselves having to rely on the evasive conundrums that he concocted throughout his life. Cheymol concludes that he

invented for himself the character of *Gran Lengua* not, as some might think, out of vanity or pride but, rather, "to cast himself as exemplary in the eyes of those he considered to be "his" people" ("*Années folles*," 11). I, for one, do not believe the answer is quite that simple.

To begin with, I fail to see why Asturias needed to cover the tracks to his past in order to defend "his" people? Why, for instance, did he reveal so little about his immediate family? Isn't it astounding that until Jimena Sáenz's biography came out in 1975 Asturias's first wife, Clemencia Amado, was never mentioned and many critics were not even aware that he had two sons from this marriage? (Gerald Martin tells us that, in Guatemala, Amado was always referred to as "la difunta," even though she was alive and well in Mexico [*O. C.*, IV, lviii].) We know Asturias grew up in a liberal household; he came in direct contact with Indians and was well aware of the poverty and squalor in which they lived; he studied their culture formally and spent a good deal of time and effort helping to translate their earliest-known manuscripts. The kind of education he received at the Instituto Nacional de Varones and later, in law school, further honed his need to take up the defense of those he perceived to be underdogs in a country where they were once kings. But the truth of the matter is: Did he really need to cast himself as their tutelary god in order to fulfill a mission he had designed for himself? Why would he seek to become identified with what was, at the time, a rejected element of Guatemalan society and, more to the point, to be perceived as its cynosure?

Asturias was intelligent, sensitive, well connected, world-renowned, and, in time, a Nobel Prize winner. Why should he need to obliterate his past in order to be perceived as "exemplary," and why be exemplary in order to be respected by the indigenous population of his native country? Not to mention the fact that the life he allows to be portrayed in the handful of interviews that are known to the public is not particularly exemplary. I would call it vague, full of generalizations and improbable coincidences rather than exemplary. No, Cheymol is closer to the truth when he writes that Asturias always left an impression of "studied naiveté," and did his best to seem "ignorant, and even foolish" in an effort "to confuse, to take the

eventual investigators off track in order to better preserve his intimate secret" (*Periodismo*, 845). The question that we need to answer, then, is: What secret is this critic referring to?

Whenever we deal with a case of fabricated identity and repressed origins, we need to examine family dynamics in order to understand what is, for all intents and purposes, rather untypical behavior. In Asturias's case verifiable biographical facts are few, but we do know, for instance, that he was raised in an environment in which women played a very important role. Besides a mother he worshiped and his devoted nanny Lola Reyes, he was surrounded by his grandmother and his Aunt Lita (Margarita) while growing up. Around these women the adult author wraps a cloud of smoke, however. We also know that Asturias's father was never very successful at supporting his family and eventually turned to alcohol. The strong element in the household and the real income earners as the boy grows up in Guatemala City seem to have been María Rosales and her own mother. Not surprisingly, given the mechanics of identification, the strong bond in the Asturias-Rosales household is the one between the author and his mother (this is clearly evident in his poetry, as we shall see) and not between him and his father. Then, again, it is certainly true that there is nothing unusual about this preference in a Latin American country. What is unusual begins to emerge when we examine the role that female characters occupy in Asturias's work. After all, it is here that he allows himself, consciously or not, a few revelations.

In Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* fiction women are always portrayed as being beyond men's reach. There are no exceptions to this rule: no happy marriages, no households filled with the patter of tiny feet. Instead, the women either disappear into thin air ("Leyenda de la Tatuana"), run away (*Hombres de maíz*), or turn their backs on men (literally) and refuse, or are unable, to conceive (*Mulata de tal*). In other words, Asturias's female characters are either unattainable or sterile. Both these are curious features (specially as they are obsessive enough to be unremitting), but the second one is particularly bizarre. Actually, one can readily find a plausible answer for such obsessional portrayal of sterility in this author's choice of themes. Suffice it to suggest that Asturias was seeking to represent the havoc wreaked on nature by the commercial order brought to the

New World by the white men. There is a good measure of truth and reason in this assertion, but still, the double figuration of sterility and unattainability begs to be explored a little further.

It is both striking and revealing that women are portrayed in Asturias's work only to be forbidden and that sexuality is consistently violent and even abject (a feature that is more closely studied in 2 and 3). This is not exclusive to *neo-Indigenista* fiction, moreover. Conforming in every way, at first, to the stereotype of the Asturian heroine, Camila Canales (in *El señor presidente*) is married to Cara de Angel, but she is sexually unattainable, and therefore, "unsullied." When the protagonists of this novel finally make love, the scene is a display of both ambiguity and disclosure. Borrowing a technique made famous by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*, Asturias juxtaposes two narrative threads: one describes the married couple lying in bed; the other, the cook running after a chicken in order to kill it for lunch.⁴ As the cook runs and pants after her victim, Cara de Angel gets closer to his goal, so that when, after several pages, penetration finally takes place, the sexual scene is abstracted from the fiction and substituted by the description of the hen having its neck cut off. Admittedly, the image of defloration could not be more vivid, but isn't Asturias also making a very explicit statement about his own perception of intercourse?

One does not need to be a psychoanalyst to realize that a significant degree of oedipal trauma is coming across in this scene, as in every portrayal of intercourse and family life in this author's *neo-Indigenista* fiction. From there to say that this trauma translates events from Asturias's own life is one short step away that perhaps we shouldn't take but must if we wish to understand fully the nature of his innovation. No matter how much this might appear to be far-fetched to some, I would like to advance at this point and develop in a later chapter that what is clearly an unresolved attachment to his mother translates in Asturias's novels as a prohibition of sexuality. This taboo is nothing other than a personal difficulty in dealing with incest emotionally and, of course, symbolically.

We have already spoken of the author's profound attachment to his mother. Attachments of this magnitude are not unusual in very young children; typically, however, they are resolved through paternal intervention (what Lacan refers to as the

"No" of the father). But we have also suggested that in the Asturias-Rosales household the role of the father was both obscured and minimized. I advance, therefore, that the author never truly resolves his oedipal attachment and remains traumatically drawn to the maternal body as object of desire and identification. At the same time, having internalized conventional social strictures, he conjoins a taboo to his desire and, by extension, to its metonymy – the female body in general.

It is important that this hypothesis not be taken lightly. I am not putting Asturias on the couch; it is his fiction that I wish to analyze, and what this fiction is revealing – no doubt about it – is a nexus between sexuality and the forbidden. Because Asturias the man was so guarded about his personal life, it certainly won't hinder to speculate about what the fiction openly reveals, especially if this will advance our understanding of both the author and his work. This is why I propose that Asturias's identification with the maternal body entails a drastic revision of both his personal history and perception of self (the latter becomes transparent, for instance, in Goyo Yic's transformation into a "female opossum with a pouch in front of him to carry the babies in" [*Hombres de maíz*, 130]). What I mean by a "revision" of personal history is simply that the identification with the maternal image brings with it, in this specific instance, an identification with María Rosales's Indian heritage. However, in order to create and maintain this identification Asturias needs or, rather, chooses to reject the other side of himself, that is, the criollo, which his father represents.

I am fully aware of Asturias's attachment to and admiration of Spanish culture, as well as his ostensible pride in his own Spanish origins. The fact remains, nonetheless, that the myth he creates involves a portrayal of himself as spokesman for and emblem of Indian culture (such desire would explain why he liked to claim, for instance, that Georges Raynaud stopped his class at Hautes Études the day he, Asturias, first walked into a crowded seminar to announce, "There you have it, a true Maya profile," an intervention that seems hardly probable in a French academic setting in 1924).⁵ In sum, then, Asturias's design to become the *Gran Lengua* for the Indians necessitated erasing the past in order to lay down and then prop up the

foundations of his own edifice, that is to say, the fantasy of his desire (to become identified with María Rosales and with that which, in his mind, she represented).

This identification with the maternal, and consequent repression of the paternal, origins – and not the need to “cast himself as exemplary in the eyes of those he considered to be ‘his’ people” – is the reason for Asturias’s mask, for the “studied naiveté,” for the missing parts meant to preserve “his intimate secret.” Very clearly, the “intimate secret” was fraught with guilt (otherwise, why the recurrent association of sexuality, violence, and pain?).⁶ The identification with or, more exactly, the desire for the maternal body is the seedbed of this guilt, and the way to deal with it, for the artist, is sublimation. It is this process, and no other, that is at the wellspring of Asturias’s *neo-Indigenista* fiction. The desire may have been cause for the guilt, but the fiction is clearly its symptom. Lacan used to say, “Joyce c’est ce qui arrive quand on refuse l’analyse”; the same can be applied to Asturias, as we shall see in Chapter 2.

Proteus in the streets of Paris

The most immediate consequence of Asturias’s mythmaking is that most events of his youth are shrouded in mystery; it should not be surprising, therefore, that his biographers disagree with one another and end up contradicting their own statements (Jimena Sáenz, truly a mine of information on the author, begins by claiming that Asturias studied law but later in her book correctly reports that he studied one year of medicine before transferring to law school). The web of deception Asturias wove throughout his life is responsible for the uncertainty in dating events in the years before he became a world-known figure. For instance, we are still uncertain about when he first arrived in Paris. He liked to maintain that he had to flee Guatemala in 1923 for political reasons and had gone to London to “study economics” (the consensus is that his family packed him aboard the first ship sailing for Europe in order to save him from a beating the like of which practically took the life of his friend Epaminondas Quintana soon after he, Asturias, and Clemente Marroquín Rojas began to write antimilitaristic propaganda in the newspaper *Tiempos Nuevos*) (Harss, 96).

Overriding what was long perceived to be factual information, a recently discovered telegram sent from Puerto Barrios before boarding the ship to Europe is dated June 24, 1924, and Asturias's first "Parisian" article published in *El Imparcial* is dated November 24, 1924 (Couffon, *O.C.*, 13, lxxxv). We must conclude that he left Guatemala almost a year later than he always claimed and, second, that he either spent a very short time in London or left that city merely in order to interview Miguel de Unamuno in Paris and then returned to the British capital. This last hypothesis is confirmed by the date of the London articles published in *El Imparcial*, between January and March 1925, months after the Paris interview with Unamuno took place.

If dates regarding the important events of his early years are somewhat distorted through the filter of memory and the writer's own knack for mythmaking, we are at least well acquainted with the activities that drew his attention during this first European sojourn. Two of them were particularly important in the development of his personal myth and seminal in his literary conception: the courses on Mayan history and civilization he took while in Paris and the involvement with the French-based Latin Press Agency, or *Prensa Latina*. Anyone who is even remotely familiar with the work of Asturias is aware of his research and translations in the field of Mayan literature. However, the importance of the nexus between his mature opinions and the meetings of *Prensa Latina* is something that has only just been brought to light by critic and diplomat Marc Cheymol (*Periodismo*).⁷

Asturias participated in the *Prensa Latina* meetings between 1925 and 1932 (with a telling exception that clearly reveals his sympathies in the Spanish Civil War: His name does not appear among those in the steering committee visiting Madrid in 1927). As Cheymol indicates, these meetings became a very significant source of stimulation, a real school for the budding author. The goal of the meetings that brought together European and Latin American journalists was the consolidation and revitalization of "Latin" power. Men from both sides of the Atlantic would travel extensively to debate the ever-elusive question of origins and give countenance to the bond between the "Latin" cultures of America and the Mediterranean lega-

tees of Rome (Cheymol, *Periodismo*, 862). The ostensible objective was self-definition, but we cannot fail to recognize that the real aim was more political and economic than ontological. To understand the need for these newfangled considerations, we must consider a devastated Europe after World War I. In contrast, "Latin" America looked like the promised land: rich, fallow, and still foundering after half a century of independence and a couple of unsuccessful attempts at reunification. It was plain as day that the ex-Spanish colonies needed a foster parent. Europe saw in this disfranchised child a perfect opportunity to open up new avenues of commerce and create a bond of fealty that could come in very handy in a moment of need like the devastation it had just lived through. By 1925, Spengler's prediction about the decline of the West read more like a sentence and less like a prophecy with each passing day.

In one last heroic gesture, the Old Continent grasped at past glories to mask the death rattle of its own – until then uncontested – hegemony. With more guile than durability, the old saw about the "Latin republics heirs to Rome" was bandied about, once again. As in the Trojan War, the real intention of this new breed of "Latin" paladins was kept under wraps, the one difference being that the wooden horse in this instance (and how symptomatic of our century this choice) was no other than a press agency. The "Latin" Press Agency set out to bring together men and women from both sides of the Atlantic and to publicize an innovating (and somewhat farfetched) solidarity. The much advertised plan was to regroup and, in order to regroup, to redefine what seemed like an unwarrantable concept for post-World War I Europe: the inherent brotherhood of the countries making up the Old Continent.

In all truth, the Euro-American connection that *Prensa Latina* was hard-selling was useful to both sides. On the one hand, it was a way to inject new blood into weary Europe and a ruse to exclude old rival cultures (namely, Saxons, Teutons, and Slavs) from the new melting pot. On the other, the bridge across the Atlantic was seen as a means to draw Europeans to the little known New World republics and to invite both tourism and commercial development into this part of the world. But what did the Latin Press and its well publicized meetings mean for Asturias?

To begin with, the international conventions held by the agency offer him the opportunity to become familiar with a world that had been out of his reach for financial reasons. Through his affiliation with the agency, he visits Italy, Belgium, Hungary, Cuba, Greece, and Egypt between 1925 and 1932. Traveling is certainly not the only benefit he draws from this involvement, however; much more importantly, *Prensa Latina* gives him the opportunity to establish what will turn out to be very useful personal and professional contacts. In addition (and this is undoubtedly his most inspired and durable gain), the ongoing polemic about the essence of the "Latin spirit," which is the perennial subject of debate, invites a meditation in the young author about his own origins and the identity of his country. This is a crucial moment in Asturias's life, for when we view such meditation within the framework of the courses in Mayan culture and anthropology that he takes under the direction of Georges Raynaud at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* and Joseph-Louis Capitan at the *Collège de France*, we begin to understand why he begins to consider the autochthonous cultures of America in a wholly new light. (Years later, in his preface to Léopold Senghor's *Poëmi Africaini* [Milan: Rizzoli, 1971], Asturias declares as much: "Dans ma solitude cathartique de Paris," he writes, "commença lentement d'abord, puis de plus en plus clairement et de façon péremptoire, le processus qui consistait à repenser le monde indo-espagnol de mon enfance. . . . Je le retrouvais soudain dans les pages et dans l'enseignement de mes maîtres, dans leurs oeuvres capitales et difficiles qui détruisaient d'une façon implacable une série de lieux communs chers à l'Europe et de complexes américains." [The process of reconsidering the Indo-Spanish world of my childhood began slowly at first and then became both absorbing and peremptory during the cathartic days of my Parisian solitude. . . . I would suddenly find it in the schooling and maxims of my teachers, in their most important and difficult works, the very ones that mercilessly stamped out both a long string of platitudes dear to Europeans, and American complexes.]).

In Paris, whetting his self-consciousness and intuition at the wellsprings of *Prensa Latina* and *Hautes Études*, the author of *El problema social del indio* has an epiphany. The Indian he has

described as "cruel in his relationship to his family, calculating . . . malevolent . . . slow-witted and stubborn," this breed of men who is neither "affectionate" nor "able to create" (53, 57), turns out to have a few saving graces after all. Asturias revises his opinions drastically during his first years in Paris and begins to regard the autochthonous inhabitants of Guatemala as a culture worthy of study and perhaps, even, of admiration. He also begins to figure that he, too, is heir to this culture. And, after all, given that he had felt socially and politically committed since his youth, what better source of inspiration for his pen than this rich and mysterious civilization. It is precisely at this point – having reached the crossroads of a confrontation with his own history (both personal and national) – that he casts himself in the role of spokesman for the indigenous community of Guatemala, a variegated culture he comes to view as having been stripped of its voice and rights since colonial days. As he comes to define and practice it from then on, his personal mission will entail returning both of these attributes to the native inhabitants with whom he has begun to identify. The *Gran Lengua* is born and so, too, is Asturias the writer.

The budding author's burning new interest in pre-Columbian civilizations mirrors popular response among Parisian intellectuals in the late teens and twenties to a still developing field of inquiry. So-called primitive art and the until then practically ignored civilizations of Africa, Oceania, and America renew Asturias's childhood interest in magic and folktales. In 1927, he collaborates with the Mexican José María González de Mendoza in a translation of the *Popol Vuh* (from the French version by Raynaud, teacher to both). The following year, a second collaboration from the same team, the *Annals of the Xahil*, sees the light. (Francisco Monterde, who knew Asturias intimately and long, claims that Asturias "obtained a subvention . . . [for the *Popol Vuh* translation] if his own name appeared along with González de Mendoza's as collaborator in the task." "To justify this," adds Monterde, "Asturias charged himself with translating only the headings under the engravings illustrating the *Popol Vuh*." It is difficult to ascertain whether a declaration made many years after the translations were completed is truthful or prompted by a soured friendship. We will continue to refer to

the translations as having been co-authored, but it is important to qualify this belief with Monterde's affirmation to the contrary. [Quoted by Luis Cardoza y Aragón in *El río*, 207–208.]

Whether he shared in the work in whole or in part, Asturias's translations are the direct consequence of his participation in a seminar directed by Raynaud on the religions of ancient Mexico, a class where, besides studying pre-Columbian religion, students analyzed the literary expression of Indian America. He had also prepared himself for the translation work by sitting in a seminar at the College de France that aimed "to penetrate the psychology of autochthonous Americans using their own mythic tales and artistic production" (Cheymol, *Periodismo*, 878). The professor in charge of this seminar was no other than Joseph-Louis Capitan, spiritual father of Paul Rivet, who, along with Marcel Mauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, was one of the founders of the Institute of Ethnology of the University of Paris in 1927. Cheymol believes it is highly probable that Asturias also attended Marcel Mauss's very popular classes sometime after 1926 (*Periodismo*, 879). Whether he did or not, Asturias was certainly familiar with Mauss's work, as we shall have ample occasion to demonstrate. At any rate, it is impossible to deny that the young author who was in the process of writing down the *Leyendas* was generally considered a specialist in Mayan culture, and some of his articles from this period attest to his erudition in the field (I am specifically referring to "Les danses indigènes de l'Amérique," *Visages du Monde*, 6, 1933, 132–33, and "La ville des serpents sacrés," *Visages du Monde*, 8, 1933, 182–84).⁸

Notwithstanding Asturias's indisputable familiarity with both the field of Mayan culture and the handful of men who specialized in it while he was a student in Paris, it is evident that he was not a "scientist dedicated to the study of myth as science," as Eliada León Hill rightfully maintains (22), but rather, a writer interested in legends and pre-Columbian poetry, genres that he combined and recast. Taking into account the work he did with Capitan and Raynaud (work that included a very close inquiry into the *Popol Vuh* and the *Annals of the Xahil*) and the probable acquaintanceship with Mauss's research, we can still conclude that in his own right he was conversant on the subject of Mayan cosmogony and (much more importantly) fully steeped in the narrative techniques of the pre-Columbian

manuscripts. Needless to say, this background knowledge will stand him in good stead when the time comes to write his own *neo-Indigenista* fiction.

Before that time comes, however, he continues to work as mythographer and translator while juggling his job as journalist. He also plays an active role in the nightlife of Montparnasse. In that open-air salon where the intelligentsia and the demimonde come to see and be seen, he meets Alejo Carpentier, Arturo Uslar Pietri, César Vallejo, Alfonso Reyes, Luis Cardoza y Aragón, and a young artist from Guatemala, Toño Salazar, who will provide the illustrations for the Argentinean edition of the *Leyendas* in 1948. The *tertulias* at La Coupole and Le Dôme are always heated – always aimed at surveying the latest venture in a city where, in those days, art and literature are invented for dinner and never reheated for breakfast. Moving in this mesmerizing world of words and sights keeps Asturias in a perpetual state of exhilaration. Perhaps it is here that his commitment to literature and innovation crystallizes. We are told, at any rate, that these cafés are the very theater where he begins to raise the curtain on the legends he had been accumulating since childhood. Apparently, he would recite them from table to table while taking down corrections and variants from people who were familiar with them (A. Uslar Pietri, “Testimonio,” *O.C.*, III, xii). He recites them so often that he finishes by casting an oral style so emphatic that it will pierce through the written narration years later when the legends are finally set down on paper.⁹

Making “fabula rasa” of surrealism

One of the subjects that comes up most often during the *tertulias* in Montparnasse is surrealism, a magnetic field for all those interested in literary trends and the avant-garde. Asturias maintained years later that he got to know André Breton, Tristan Tzara, and Aragón during this phase of his stay in Paris (López Alvarez, 80). What we will never be able to ascertain is what degree of familiarity he really had with these poets. We are sure, though, that in March 1928, while traveling to the meeting of the Latin Press Agency in Havana, he strikes up a friendship with Robert Desnos. This friendship would prove to

be both lasting and a source of inspiration when, less than a year later, Asturias writes a story entitled "La barba provisional" (The provisional beard) in which one of the characters is Desnos himself (*El Imparcial*, February 26, 1929, in *Periodismo*, 318).

What is most astounding is not that this story should be an amalgam of all the devices stocked in the surrealists' arsenal but that it is the one and only example in Asturias's career in which surrealist techniques appear portrayed in a purely European context. A year later, when the *Leyendas* are published, the change of style is short of prodigious. The brand-new author has made his the full gamut of rhetorical devices exploited by Breton, Eluard, and Desnos. On the other hand, he has left behind typically Eluardian tomfoolery of the type "mujeres olorosas . . . con más cosmético que pelo en la cabeza" (perfumed women . . . with more makeup than hair on their heads; "La barba provisional," *Periodismo*, 318), and cast an imagery that is in no way derivative: "mountains capable of chopping off a forest"; "arms as green as woodland blood"; and trees that tally up "the years of four hundred days according to the moons they have witnessed" (*Leyendas*, 30, 48, 37).

Critics have always maintained that Asturias was under the influence of surrealism when he wrote the *Leyendas* (de Arriagoitia, 40; Cheymol, *Periodismo*, 849). This is unarguably true insofar as his aim was to produce fantastic or incongruous imagery by means of unnatural juxtapositions and combinations. His contact with the French movement was likewise responsible for his lifelong interest in magic, the esoteric, psychoanalysis, automatic writing, and wordplay, interests that season his own brand of *neo-Indigenismo* with a wholly unique flavor. What has not been sufficiently emphasized, however, is that Asturias goes much farther than Breton, Eluard, or Aragon in transcending the strictures of the Western mind and grasping the thought patterns of a preindustrial culture. After all, the French poets may have had every intention to fathom the "primitive" world, but their knowledge of preindustrial cultures could never compare with Asturias's direct experience. Asturias is well aware of this distinction when he declares to Guillermo Yepes Boscán: "The surrealism of my books mirrors somewhat the magical and primitive mentality of the Indians . . . I believe this is, in

fact, the foundation of my purported surrealism" ("Asturias y el Lodo Sagrado de las cosas," *Imagen*, 14–15, Caracas, December 15–30, 1967).

Another noteworthy difference between Asturias's brand of surrealism and that of the French school is in the portrayal of sexuality. While Breton and Eluard substitute a seraphic idealism for carnal desire, Asturias crams a novel like *Mulata de tal* with reckless wantonness. For the surrealists the ideal of perfection is Mélusine the woman-child;¹⁰ for Asturias the feminine lure is an irrational and licentious mulatto woman who is as far removed from innocence as Mélusine is from unbridled eroticism. As Georges Bataille once complained, the surrealists' emphasis on spiritual ideals masks bodily functions to the point of denying them – he refers to them as "les emmerdeurs idéalistes" (Surya, 122). In contrast, the body and all its functions are of the utmost importance in Asturias's conception. In his allegories, sexuality and reproduction are substituted for eroticism – gratuitous and nonproductive – in order to suggest a debacle of the natural order. Human selfishness and exploitation lead to barrenness (all women in *Mulata* are sterile, all responsible for the Ilóm massacre in *Hombres* lose their children); generosity is always debunked by an inability to give. By preferring material wealth to solidarity (the choice of the Merchant of Priceless Jewels in the "Leyenda de la Tatuana," of the commercial corn growers in *Hombres*, and of Celestino Yumí in *Mulata*), man defies the equilibrium of the universe. This is why eroticism is rampant in *Mulata*; like gold, it gives the momentary illusion of possessing but leaves no issue for posterity. In other words, lust for material goods is sterile (and therefore inhuman) because it turns men against each other. Only sexuality and procreation can reflect the natural order. A universe rampant with discord and greed like the one portrayed in the "Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido," in six sections of *Hombres de maíz*, and in the whole of *Mulata de tal* is meant to illustrate the consequences of man's erroneous choice – preferring wealth to human contact.

The use of eroticism as an allegorical figuration of the cosmic imbalance that reigns in commercial society gives token of the fact that Asturias's brand of *neo-Indigenismo* is never gratuitous, never decoration for its own sake. In contrast with the

picture-postcard views of native Americans written almost half a century earlier by authors such as J. R. Hernández (*Azcaxochitl o la flecha de oro* [1878]) or Eulogia Palma y Palma (*La Hija de Tutl-Xiu* [1884]), the narrator of *Hombres* harnesses didactic intention with a firm grasp of Indian culture. His conviction about the purposefulness of literature is yet another way in which he differs from the French surrealists. Underscoring with a memorable jab the latter's fundamental lack of belief in the marvelous ("Lo maravilloso invocado en el descreimiento"), Alejo Carpentier maintains that their work was never more than "a literary stratagem, boring like a certain kind of purposefully composed oneiric literature" (Prologue to *El reino de este mundo*). The ingredient that saves Asturias from writing works that are all artifice and no substance is the very opposite of *descreimiento*. To him, literature *must* have a function. Fortunately for us, his *neo-Indigenista* literature transcends the narrow limits of mere proselytism because purpose, insight, and artfulness join hands in its conception and realization. (The fact that a large number of more or less inspired pamphleteers view the *Indigenista* label as a useful forum for indoctrination does not mean that all the literature of this movement strives exclusively to catechize; its aim is to persuade, it is true, but there is no reason why such persuasion cannot be skillful as well as convincing.)

In sum, then, we can say that Asturias's uniqueness resides in his ability to combine technique with aims. He shares a number of rhetorical figurations with the French surrealists but makes tabula rasa of their sanctimoniousness and artificiality; to him, devices are useful but only the means to an end. And in the *Legendas*, *Hombres*, and *Mulata*, the end is not the medium but the message: always didactic and always trailing social change.

Now that we have some idea of Asturias's defiance of precedent, we must also recognize that the principles and rules of composition formulated by Breton, Eluard, and Aragon present themselves to him as a natural choice. As Ricardo Navas Ruiz has pertinently observed, the similarities between the aesthetic approach of the Maya and that of the surrealists is short of astounding (*O.C.*, III, xxvii).¹¹ We know, for instance, that the magic value attributed to words and the use of litanies, paradox, and what the surrealists refer to as "conducting

threads" (*files conducteurs*) are key features of both literatures. There should be no doubt that Asturias became aware of these analogies only after living in Paris. It is in this city, and in the mid-1920s, that the three formative forces in his career – Mayan cosmogony, the precepts of surrealism, and the quest for an American identity issuing from the discussions in *Prensa Latina* – come together in one coherent whole. As a result of this confluence, Asturias the writer is born. Naturally, there are other shades, other nuances in his writing that were either present before he arrived in Paris or filtered into his world vision in later years. For instance, the growing boy's liberal background was the seedbed for the law student's and the mature author's political involvement. But, in order to understand the enormous evolution that takes place between the man who writes *El problema social del indio* with a great deal of condescension and detachment and the one who studies under Georges Raynaud, we cannot underestimate the relevance of these first six years in Paris (1924–30). This is the time when ideas crystallize and style develops; it is in Paris – many miles from home – that he invents a literary language that is unique in every way.

The birth of neo-Indigenismo

As we have seen, it is also in Paris that Asturias conceives for himself the role of spokesman for the Indians. Naturally, this new role entails a drastic revision of the attitudes and opinions he has expressed in his dissertation. After spending several years formally studying Mayan culture, Asturias's admiration for those he used to include among "the inferior races" knows no bounds (*El problema social del indio*, 57). This newly acquired posture vis-à-vis Indian culture is short of being revolutionary for an American intellectual in the 1920s. Before Asturias began to write, if a writer chose Indians and their culture as a literary subject in Latin America, there were two choices: Either the writer exploited them for their exotic, which is to say, their decorative value, or defended them in melodramatic tracts that always responded to the same cliché-ridden model and culminated in the same impasse: Indians should have rights but they are exploited and abused by a white minority; the white

minority pushes them so far that they will have to rebel. And here comes the dead end: What happens after the rebellion? Because Indians have no understanding of the legal and economic system that controls them, they will have to control their rage or fight and die in vain. As Alcides Arguedas's *Raza de bronce* (1919) and Jorge Icaza's *Huasipungo* (1934) make amply clear, change is not possible because native Americans are bound and gagged by a culture that alienates them.

This dead end typifies the literature of the *Indigenismo* until Ciro Alegría writes his thematically similar and yet ideologically innovative *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* (1941). Alegría suggests that the only way out for the Indian is through education, a process that entails learning about the hegemony in power and, in so doing, becoming culturally mestizo (i.e., astride two cultures like Benito Castro, the hero in the second part of his saga). The blueprint for salvation portrayed in *El mundo* is no more and no less than a dramatization of the political program hailed by the left-wing A.P.R.A. party, (*Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana*) whose leader, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, sees in the communal structure basic to the *Incario* a predisposition or, more exactly, a fertile ground for socialism. The *apristas* further believe that in order to bring traditional communities up to the present the Indian has to be taught the culture that governs his country and convinced that the self-damaging isolation under which he has taken umbrage since the Conquest must come to an end.

This will be the artistic objective of Peru's most genial *neo-Indigenista*, José María Arguedas. In his mature work – specifically *Todas las sangres* (1964) and *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1970) – the Peruvian bellwether dramatizes how his country's future is actually in the hands of the mestizo or the *indio ladinizado*, who, like Rendón Willka, in *Todas las sangres*, or Don Diego, in *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*, has come in contact with the ways of Western culture. In ethnological studies as well as in fiction he will reiterate how, left to their own devices and isolated from the world, Indians will soon be stripped of all they own and swallowed up by the voracious maelstrom of capitalism.

Asturias's grasp of the long-range consequence of cultural integration is not as broad-based as that of his Peruvian col-

league, but his portrayal of native Americans has the great merit of dealing with the heart of the matter. In essence, what he sets out to do is bring to life the original contribution of Indian culture. After all, how could we even begin to discuss the assimilation of Indians into modern civilization if we are not aware of their most fundamental beliefs? Writing in Spanish, Asturias will be the first modern author to portray a worldview and a system of values that are inherently indigenous. Under the mediating influence of anthropology, as González Echevarría observes, he “was to write novels whose inner coherence imitated that of sacred texts” (*Myth and archive*, 159). But, unlike most anthropologists, the author of the *Leyendas* will not suggest that the Indian way of life must be preciously preserved under a bell jar. He simply underscores the worth – and even the moral supremacy – of Indian culture and makes amply clear that the answer to the Indian problem lies in coexistence, not coalescence. The focus of his fiction will be the autochthonous culture of Mesoamerica and the popular myths and legends still current in his homeland, not the process that must take place in order to become adapted to *ladino* society.

Asturias comes up with a different perspective from which to view the Indians’ quandary eleven years before *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* appears in print, but no one notices because no one really understands the intent of his *Leyendas de Guatemala* when they first come out. He portrays Indian culture as a buried and multilayered city (“una ciudad formada de ciudades enterradas, superpuestas, como los pisos de una casa de altos”) that must be rediscovered and recognized (18). Rather than amalgamating Indian and Western elements into a mestizo culture (like the one Arguedas proposes), Asturias goes to great lengths to portray the former as a wholly separate, but no less integral, part of his country’s cultural patrimony.

What Asturias portrays is further explored forty years after the *Leyendas* by Carlos Guzmán Böckler and Jean-Loup Herbert. This team of social scientists convincingly argues that Guatemala’s problem will not be solved by what they term an “illusory” integration, or *ladinización*, but rather by means of “an objective and veritable dialectic that will allow . . . the autochthonous inhabitants to recover the soil and the history from which they have been violently stripped” (*Guatemala*, 99).

What this means is that striving for integration and wishing to accelerate what Angel Rama refers to as the process of *mestizaje* is not a real solution because fusion fails to recognize or validate the originality and uniqueness of the disparate elements that are cast into the melting pot (*Transculturación narrativa en América latina*, 82). Furthermore, submitting to a process of *ladinización* is tantamount to recognizing the supposed superiority of the dominant caste since the need for integration is predicated on the fact that the Indian is ostensibly unsuited for survival as he presently is (i.e., is not good enough, fit enough, or able enough in his present state and can only be "improved" through miscegenation).¹²

Guzmán Böckler and Herbert further maintain that "before the 'indigenous' element can recover its identity, can become the author of its own history, the thread of time must be tied on the very spot where it was severed" (31). Asturias couldn't be more in agreement, which is why he anchors his *neo-Indigenista* fiction on the traditions and legends of his ancestors and is perpetually sifting the past in search of plots, characters, and symbols. His intention is not to portray the past as a frozen, crystallized, and romantically distant paradise, but to actualize the elements of traditional Indian culture in order to demonstrate that the future of his country depends on the recognition and validation of the indigenous heritage.

The author of the *Leyendas* understands and predicates this need not only much before Guzmán Böckler and Herbert, but also more than thirty years before Rosario Castellanos and other authors of the *Ciclo de Chiapas* begin portraying "convincing Indian individuals in the context of their own culture" (Sommers, "Indian-oriented novel," 262).¹³ His momentous innovation – and the reason why he should be seen as the first *neo-Indigenista* – is that he is the first to move beyond the stereotype of superficial realism and translate the Indian psyche in an effort to provide an accurate portrait of his people. This he does by means of allegories that permit him to demonstrate, first, that the equilibrium between man and nature must be renewed; second, that greed leads to destruction; and third, that human beings have the power to overcome obstacles.

Most important to our understanding of Asturias's work is that he teaches by wedding Western techniques and thematic and stylistic elements borrowed from native American litera-

tures. The originality of his innovation cannot be ignored: He is not merely defending the Indians, he is writing about them from their own perspective. As Carlos Fuentes once declared, "Asturias deja de tratar al indio . . . de una manera documental, para penetrar la raíz mítica, la raíz mágica, a través del lenguaje que hablan estos seres. A través de su lenguaje, Asturias los salva de la anonimidad, esa anonimidad impuesta por la historia" ("Situación del escritor," 19–20).¹⁴ Asturias does not suggest (as do Ciro Alegría and José María Arguedas) that Indians have to understand and absorb the beliefs and thought structures of the dominant class. Instead, his aim is to show the wealth and validity of the Indians' own beliefs and thought structures. His newly gained perception of native American cultures, as well as his efforts to grasp the meaning of a national identity, helps us understand why he doesn't content himself with portraying native Americans merely as decorative elements.

This type of portrayal has traditionally been the *modus operandi* of so-called *Indianista* writers, such as Juan León Mera and José de Alencar. Writing in the wake of independence, these authors turn to the mother cultures of the American continent as an attractive lineage for the identity of the budding republics. However, unfamiliar as they are with the actual realities of Indian civilization, they idealize the aboriginal inhabitants. And because such idealization is in marked contrast with the deplorable living conditions of the contemporary inhabitants of the New World, they exalt the values of the ancient indigenous cultures and decry the unmaking of their contemporaries, an attitude that translates as an insensitivity to modern times in their works of literature. The indigenous past that the *Indianista* authors invent is always glorious while the present is systematically apostatized.

Asturias's attitude is in dramatic contrast to the *Indianistas*'. To him, the Indian is not a romantic conceit to be idealized and marketed. Like the *Indigenistas*, who begin writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, his focus is on social injustice and his goal to champion the cause of a disfranchised race.¹⁵ We know only too well, however, that such strong didactic emphasis has been responsible, time and again, for a number of so-called "literary" works that age badly: They rely on formulas and typically culminate in the same old cul-de-sac (Indians do not seem to have a way out of the dependency that binds them to

white culture). Asturias rethinks the *Indigenistas*' model and portrays native culture as an enduring force. For instance, *Hombres de maíz* does not conclude with a power struggle; it begins with one. This gives the author a wide margin of some three hundred pages to move beyond the deadlock of the *Indigenista* prototype. What Asturias seeks to do in this novel is outline an evolutionary path through which the Indian can return from chaos (the Ilóm massacre) to order (communal living in Pisigüilito). This path involves a rite of passage that is dramatized through three different characters – Gaspar Ilóm, Goyo Yic, and Nicho Aquino – and culminates with a return to the patriarchal agricultural model characteristic of the Mayan classic period (Goyo's reconversion as a corn farmer in the epilogue).

In sum, then, Asturias's newfangled model departs from the cliché-ridden work of the *Indigenistas* in three ways: First of all, he is, to borrow Joseph Sommers's expression, the first to penetrate "beneath the surface of Indian consciousness" ("Indian-oriented novel," 262); second, he incorporates with great success the narrative grammar and structural devices on which many pre-Columbian manuscripts rely; and third, he provides a model that translates the evolution from chaos to order in *Hombres*. It is for these modifications to the genre that we should not refer to his work as *Indigenista* but, instead, borrowing Tomás Escajadillo's useful term, identify it as *neo-Indigenista*. We also need to recognize Asturias's handling of indigenous material as the most mature and, stylistically speaking, as the most consummately conceived moment in the history of a literary tendency that begins with the publication of Narciso Aréstegui's *El padre Horán* (1848) and continues to the present day (Tomás Escajadillo, unpublished doctoral dissertation). As we shall have ample opportunity to observe, no writer has outdone the author of the *Leyendas de Guatemala* in forging a new idiom that combines the grammar and syntax of Spanish with the rhetorical devices of Mayan literature and the creation myths of Mesoamerica.

Tropical anamorphosis

Turning for inspiration to the tales he repeatedly heard as a child, the young author composes the first of his literary pa-

limpsests between 1925 and 1930 (in a letter to Alfonso Reyes, he declares having rewritten the *Leyendas* countless times and taken "five years or more" to complete them ["Mis pasos por España," August 23, 1930, in *Periodismo*, 439]). This collection of folktales is conceived and written at a curious turning point in history: shortly after the Great War has turned the self-esteem and complacency of the nineteenth century into self-deprecation and galling reevaluation. The implications of this introspective new attitude are many. Mallarmé argues that language is tired and culture wearisome ("La chair est triste, hélas, et j'ai lu tous les livres"), and Dada and surrealism rant and rave in the face of a world morbidly rotten at the core. Breton and his followers seek to change this spiritually flaccid society by pursuing untainted truths – whether in the far reaches of man's unconscious or in distant civilizations as yet unsullied by industrial perversion. It is not surprising that Asturias, fleeing from a society ruled by tyranny, exploitation, and lies, should enlist in the ranks of the men and women whose overriding goal was to streamline Western civilization by digging further into its origins and renewing its language.

For the Guatemalan émigré, renewal and linguistic experimentation was not innovation for its own sake, however. For Asturias, words were both a commitment – the means to educate – and a profession of faith; with them he sets out to fashion a new American idiom that will incorporate the language and myths of Mesoamerica. Recasting these myths into the warp and weft of his fiction, he will communicate the kind of socio-political evolution he envisions for his country in the allegorical moral lessons of the *Leyendas*.

The seven legends published in Madrid in the spring of 1930 by Editorial Oriente begin with an exordium entitled "Guatemala." This portrait of the author's homeland is followed by an exhortation, "Ahora que me acuerdo" (Now that I remember), in which the marvelous "Cuero de Oro" (Golden Skin) describes his adventures in the woods to a goitered pair named Don Chepe and Doña Tina. (Goiter is a sign of fertility in Mayan mythology.) Golden Skin's tale is meant to act as an inducement to the couple so that they will tell him the five legends of Guatemala that complete the volume: "Leyenda del Volcán," "Leyenda del Cadejo," "Leyenda de la Tatuana,"

“Leyendas del Sombrerón,” and “Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido.”

No one can argue that the message of the *Leyendas de Guatemala* is not puzzling. A thread does lead the reader through the labyrinth of Asturias's baroque edifice of words, however. The first step that must be taken in order to grasp the metaphorical meaning of this collection is to identify the genre to which they belong. Because they are stories of supernatural events portrayed through allegorical means, it makes sense to postulate that their author has maintained more than a trace of the Aesopian blueprint in his own composition. Those finding this hypothesis improbable need only to recall what all readers of Asturias know to be true: his commitment to use literature as a didactic tool. It seems plausible to assume that if all his later works enforce a useful truth, one is likely present in the *Leyendas* as well. With this idea as guiding light, and abiding by Propp's and Greimas's suggestions for analyzing folktales, I began this study by removing all decorative ingredients from each of the seven legends in order to reveal the elements of topic progression. Only after finding out what was being said could I examine the manner in which the message was being delivered or, in other words, proceed to analyze the stylistic devices deployed by Asturias. The windfall was to discover that the bits of information that were the moral teachings of each legend could be articulated into a global message. Asturias's collection was not just a cleverly wrought appetizer when compared with his later and heftier works, but a complex and elaborate piece of craftsmanship with a politically committed content never before elucidated.

The legends begin with an overview of the author's motherland; every effort is made, every avenue taken, to provide a diachronic portrait that reveals the many facets, layers, and cultures comprising his home country. “Guatemala,” the tale that opens the volume, is divided into seven parts: a prologue, three lists (real and mythical cities that go into the making of the country), two anecdotes (about Brother Pedro de Betancourt and about Fray Payo Enríquez de Rivera), and an epilogue. As the narration begins, a cart approaches the outskirts of an as yet unnamed city; the owners of the first small shop on the street have goiter and enjoy telling stories (i.e., they are laden

with the country's heritage, as Cheymol points out in "*Années folles*" [166]). After several allusions to some of the legends we are about to read ("Tatuana," "Sombrerón," "Cadejo"), the legendary "Cuco de los Sueños" – a sort of sandman figure – is introduced; it is he who allows the reader to picture the teetering edifice of a country composed of "buried cities, superimposed like the floors on a multistory house" (18). This edifice is Guatemala itself, of course, layered like the skins of an onion because it contains the variegated heritage of many cultures superimposed upon each other (as Asturias argues in an article dated April 18, 1927, the "natural landscape" of his home country has "two shades of color" – Indian and Spanish; neither should be relegated in favor of the other [*Periodismo*, 174–75]).¹⁶

The enumeration and description of these layers follow the prologue. The Cuco de los Sueños begins by introducing the Indian temple states (Palenque, Copán, Quiriguá, Tikal), then the mythological capitals of the Maya (Xibalbá, Tulán), and finally, the Spanish cities (the first capital founded in 1524; Antigua, in 1542; and Guatemala de la Asunción, in 1773). At this point, like the eye of a camera moving closer to its subject, the narrator brings on the scene two anecdotes as a sequel to the tales of the cities; both of these involve well-known figures of Guatemalan hagiology, and both, as we shall see, reiterate the story's central motif. Finally, the first tale concludes with an epilogue in which the narrator makes himself present. He is arriving at the capital and, visibly stirred by the sights he enumerates, his nostalgia reaches the level of paroxysm in the concluding apostrophe: "¡Mi pueblo! ¡Mi pueblo!" (My town, but also, My people).

As a number of critics have pointed out, the opening tale of the *Leyendas* is openly nostalgic and doubtlessly translates the feelings of the young writer who had spent well over five years away from home by the time the stories appear in print (Bellini, *Narrativa*, 22). The filter through which events are perceived is memory – the author-narrator is recalling a past beyond his reach – and for this reason (though not exclusively), the country's beginnings appear shrouded in fiction. As Gabriel García Márquez would do many years later when describing the almost mythical foundation of Macondo, Asturias mixes improbable

events with historical details or with a statutory order that seems to legitimize them. For instance, we discover that Guatemala "was built over buried cities" – a statement of fact but only in a figurative sense (17). Naturally, Guatemala (the ambiguity inherent in the homology of country and capital is fully intended and thoroughly exploited) was not built directly above the buried cities but, symbolically speaking, on the surface of a Mayan past already in ruins at the time of the Spanish arrival. Also, even if it is true, *grosso modo*, that "to overlay the stones of its walls the mortar was mixed with milk" and "to substantiate its foundation thirty bundles of feathers and thirty bundles of quills filled with gold powder were buried" (17), it is obvious that the actual – and meticulously "compiled" – amount of feathers and gold is pure poetic invention.

Time and again, the narrator feels the need to rouse and then suspend our disbelief – and it is this striking idiosyncrasy that we need to highlight. This is why, immediately after describing the legendary founding of Guatemala, for instance, he indicates that all the "facts" he has recorded can be verified in "a stout chronicle of the city's lineages" (17). This is also why he qualifies the more farfetched statements with impersonal clauses such as, "*It is believed that* the trees inhale the breath of the people who live in the buried cities" (17). As in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, doubtful or questionable events are never allowed to mar the narrator's credibility; quite the contrary, everything in these tales aims to protect it at all costs. Suspending the reader's disbelief and gaining his tacit accord to be manipulated are crucial to Asturias's scheme. For this reason, he must preserve the illusion of the narrator's scrupulousness (which is to say, of the text's dependability) at all costs; only the reader's total trust will permit the legerdemain that is to follow.

Asturias's whole project turns on the need to portray what is legendary as believable, a subterfuge that will allow him to invert this very tenet in order to subvert the official version of history that is both generated and revered by his country's dominant class. It is this inversion that will even motivate the choice of a rhetorical figure prized as few others by the French surrealists. This figure – known as "l'un dans l'autre" (one within the other) – is the backbone of the first tale and speaks volumes on the allegorical design of the entire collection of folktales.

The purview of "l'un dans l'autre" is as obvious as its name suggests: The poet or artist creates an unedited image by fitting an object, no matter how unseemly or grotesque, within another. For instance, in *An Andalusian Dog*, a human skull appears on the thorax of a moth, and in one of Man Ray's photographs a lion's mane is portrayed within the flame of a match. In the same manner, the "Guatemala" that is described in the first legend is a sort of strongbox within which the cities of yesteryear are unscarredly preserved" (18). We are led to believe that the first Spanish cities, including the "twin to the city of our lordship Saint James," were built directly on the ruins of Palenque and Copán (18). Above them lies Antigua, "the second capital built by the Conquistadors," and last but not least, Guatemala de la Asunción crowns an edifice described as a "many-storied city" (*una ciudad de altos* [20]). In the two anecdotes that follow (sort of episodes from the lives of saints as seen by Asturias), we have a further illustration of "l'un dans l'autre."

The first of these takes place in the Church of San Francisco where "a woman cries her eyes out in front of the Virgin"; the action, in this instance, takes place in the seventeenth century (21). The saintly priest Pedro de Betancourt approaches and asks what ails her.¹⁷ She answers that she has just lost a man she greatly loved. As soon as he hears her words, Father Pedro seeks out the eyes of the Virgin on the altar and finds himself suddenly transformed: "He had grown taller and stronger" (22). By the grace of the Virgin Father Pedro miraculously becomes Don Rodrigo, the lover of the until then inconsolable lady. In the second anecdote, another priest, Fray Payo Enríquez de Rivera, walks furtively by in the late afternoon, "hiding the light in the dark folds of his cassock" (22). Brief though it is, this anecdote clearly conveys the same message as the previous one: the commingling of antithetical elements. The three pairs of opposite images in the three lists and the episodes from the lives of saints – light in "dark folds," the canonized priest in the body of the sinful adventurer, the Mayan temple cities within the colonial capitals – all contain or enfold each other in keeping with the rhetorical function of the surrealist technique that Asturias has chosen to orchestrate his first tale.

Some readers might think that the role of surrealist technique serves a purely decorative purpose in Asturias's work,

when actually his allegorical schemes are often entirely dependent on it. The sustained use of "l'un dans l'autre" in the first story is a case in point. The goal of this technique is to bring together antithetical or incongruous objects and to eliminate the margin that normally exists between them; through a marriage of contraries the poet dilates our conventional and limited perception of reality. However, the coming together of unlikely elements does not produce a synthesis (this would destroy the tension or, to use the surrealists' term, the "state of alert," that the poet must maintain at all costs); instead, the result is a juxtaposition that Breton calls a "double center" to designate an object that is itself and another or, simultaneously, presence and absence like the "Guatemala" of the first tale, jointly indigenous and Spanish, pagan and Christian, ancient and modern. (It bears keeping in mind that Asturias doesn't pull this union of contraries out of a hat. Mary Ann Caws underscores how "Breton's poetry betrays a constant awareness of opposites, something deliberately provoking them to upset the habitual perceptions of the reader." And she adds, "Many of his images are clearly based on the obvious or implied dualities of soft and hard, clear and dark, absence and presence, one and many, elaborate costumes and nakedness, and so on." This need to link together incongruous or antithetical terms stems from the fact that "all surrealist effort is directed against the stability to which we are accustomed" [94].)

The surrealists' war against stability follows their determination to enhance perception by means of a poetic condition, or "état de poésie," that can free mental processes heretofore restrained by rational control and social conventions. Through the agency of "l'un dans l'autre," human beings can gain an openness to the world and a sense of total freedom that will allow them to perceive the marvelous. There is no doubt that the marvelous in the case of Asturias's first tale is that "this" (the present-day city) is also "that" (the ruined city-states – Tikal, Quiriguá, Palenque). In other words, Guatemala is a "pueblo" (to borrow the author's own term) that cannot deny its roots even if the class in power refuses to recognize them: In the period between 1925 and 1929, when the author writes "Guatemala," the concept of an integrated city where Mayan and Spanish elements coexist without one overpowering or sup-

pressing the other is unthinkable from the perspective of the criollo bourgeoisie.¹⁸

Give or take a few *quetzales*, Asturias belongs to this class himself, which is why he echoes the “unequivocally racist” prejudices of the “Europeanized and particularly reactionary minority” in his dissertation (Martin, *O.C.*, IV, clxii). How far and how quickly has his posture vis-à-vis the Indian evolved since then, however. By 1929, the “buen sociólogo burgués” who wrote *El problema social del indio* has become a student of ethnology capable of recognizing the worth of autochthonous Americans and the magnitude of their contribution to the national culture of his homeland (Díaz Rozzotto, “Orígenes,” 42). It is this newly acquired perspective that informs the lesson of the first tale in the *Leyendas*; Asturias recognizes that Guatemala is a palimpsest of stratified cities that cannot deny its origins or its people and translates this newly gained understanding by means of a typically surrealist concept. Since writing his dissertation, he has learned that Europeans don’t really need to be brought over in order to “improve the race”; the race is hybrid and heterogeneous. This is its uniqueness and, if played right, its passport to the future.

But what is the best way to convey this heterogeneity, this commingling without fusion that translates the cultural and human reality of his homeland? It is here that “l’un dans l’autre” comes to the rescue. Asturias needed to find a rhetorical device that ruled out synthesis while inviting the coalition of disparate elements. “L’un dans l’autre” perfectly translates the lack of integration that characterizes his kaleidoscopic country. The author’s aim is to teach the reader that his homeland is a nation of nations even if the forces that be do everything in their power to squelch the past and homogenize the culture.¹⁹ In Asturias’s eyes, Guatemala is a towering Babel that refuses to recognize itself and continues to ignore the rich diversity that composes it. This, and no other, is the lesson of his first tale; after all, isn’t this the revolutionary new perspective that the young ex-positivist has learned in Raynaud’s and Capitan’s classes? In 1930 such a notion is still chimerical, however. Guatemala not only denies its heterogeneity, it also makes every effort to dislodge itself from the vestiges of cultures preceding the arrival of the Spanish.

It is in order to translate this relentless spoliation that Asturias introduces the figure of "Cuco de los Sueños," a character who stitches together the tales told by the narrator ("el Cuco de los Sueños va hilando los cuentos" [18, 20–22]). In order to understand fully the role of the Cuco, we need to examine the themes of the tales told within the first story. They are all based in the past, beginning, as we have seen, with the saga of the great Mayan temple cities – Copán, Palenque, Tikal, Quiriguá – and continuing with an account of the mythological cities and the Spanish capitals.²⁰

It is curious that no one has taken much notice of the Cuco and the role he plays in this first legend, particularly when we think that Asturias takes time to define the term in his very useful glossary to the *Leyendas*. Here he explains that in his homeland "the term *cuco* is popularly used in place of *coco*, and it is in this sense that the author intends it" (158). The time has come, therefore, to ask ourselves, who or what is a *coco*? Traditionally speaking, in Latin America the *coco* is the bogeyman, a threatening figure who steals children. However, in Asturias's tale the sphere of action of this character is somewhat different; in this case, the *cuco* is the one who "weaves dreams together" (20). Nonetheless, in both contexts this character's function is to dispossess, an obvious projection of castration anxiety. (As Bruno Bettelheim indicates, "Fairy tales proceed on both a conscious and an unconscious level. . . . Thus the objects used in them must be appropriate on the overt, conscious level while also calling forth associations quite different from their overt significance" [*The Uses of Enchantment*, 268–269]). It is impossible to understand fully Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* fiction without keeping Bettelheim's precept well in mind. No matter how resistant some critics may be to the presence of unconscious motivation in speech acts, the author of the *Leyendas* truly uses his fiction as a projection of his own psyche, a fact that becomes even more readily apparent when we read a novel like *Mulata*.)

What is carried off by the Cuco de los Sueños in Asturias's tale are the ancestral cities. This theft points up the function of the writer-creator, whose mission will be to restore the myths or tangible traces of a past that has been repressed. As Marc Cheymol shrewdly points out, Asturias's role will be to write down

the history of his country through the pages of his own book, or, in other words, to *create* Guatemala in the first meaning of this verb. This is not a hyperbole on Cheymol's part; Asturias always waxed lyrical when referring to "the enormous power of words" and to the idea that in Indian cultures "to pronounce with precision the word that designates . . . a being, an object is to create them or, if they existed beforehand, to have power over them" (Cheymol, "*Années folles*, 168; Harss, 105).

The interplay between the Cuco who dispossesses and the narrator who restitutes is fundamental in order to understand the grand design of the tale as well as the transcendental creator role in which Asturias casts himself.²¹ The fact that the stories in the *Leyendas* are being told to a character whose traditional function is to steal is no accident and one that puts the narrator in charge by implication. By this I mean that because the stories are being told, they obviously have not been lost and it is the narrator whose mission it will be to reconstitute them, starting in the second tale, "Ahora que me acuerdo" (Now that I remember).

This legend describes the exchange of gifts between Golden Skin and the goitered pair. In the words of the author himself, Golden Skin "tells the story of his consecration as "Prince" . . . as "eminence" with the object of gaining the affection and trust of the goitered couple" (glossary to the *Leyendas*, 158). Once Golden Skin convinces them of his high lineage (he is "the most recent incarnation of Quetzalcoatl" [158]), the couple feels disposed to share with him their own inherited bounty, which are the Guatemalan legends that the Cuco de los Sueños has woven together in the first tale. At this point, the polarity between the first two accounts becomes evident; if the first one is a tale of loss, the second heralds the restitution of the past and the rehabilitation of waylaid traditions that henceforth will be transmitted to the reader.

The concept of polarity – a key element in Mayan literature, as well as in the surrealist aesthetic – becomes a handy tool for Asturias when the time comes to link the first two tales of the *Leyendas*. It is likewise instrumental as a structuring principle for the second. In "Now that I remember," the most conspicuous handling of this technique brings together the antithetical pair creation/destruction. Foreshadowing what will become a

veritable fixation of Asturias's mature work, this tale opens with an invocation to fertility that is fully reminiscent of certain entreaties in the *Popol Vuh* (for instance, "Grant us our posterity . . . , "grant life, grant existence to my children, to my offspring! . . . Grant them daughters, grant them sons!" [25]). Immediately after, Golden Skin describes the beginning of life and the three requests of the first human beings: heritage, posterity, and germination (25–26). Fertility enters the tale as such a dominant motif that even the mud "smells of woman's blood" (26). This bountiful, prodigal nature is not safe from destruction, however. In fact, violence springs forth in the story with as much insistence as the forces of creation. More so, it turns out, as even the tree trunks in the forest are going to be drenched with "streams of blood" (26).

We know that violent imagery associated with cruelty is typical of much surrealist poetry. Caws points out the frequent references to "damaging, breaking, laceration, tearing apart, rending, to the scraping out of wounds and the dissecting of nerves, to cracking, piercing, whipping, shattering, strangling, spitting, scourging, to wailing, brutality, and bleeding" in the poetry of Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Desnos, and Eluard (25–26). The intent of this rampant brutality is to shock with such violence that the conventional straitjacket of seamliness, propriety, and decency will be torn asunder. This is certainly the reason why Aragon recommends that filmmakers should "whip the public," a notion he no doubt borrows from Artaud's *Theater of Cruelty* (another author with whom Asturias was undoubtedly familiar; cf. Cheymol, "*Années folles*," 179).

The dialectic of creation and destruction in "Now that I remember" reaches its apex when Golden Skin becomes conjoined with the soil in a veritable "sexual agony of feeling" (28), an image typical of the similar process whereby the surrealist poet brings together elements from different spheres (specifically, in this case, procreation and death) and connects them by seemingly arbitrary means of his own invention. Caws highlights that "opposites are the extreme poles of the surrealist marvelous and the momentum and intensity of the marvelous depend on the sudden abolition of the space between them" (34). In its most extreme moments Breton's poetry and As-

turias's prose turn this intensity into a veritable revolution against things as they are conventionally perceived. And these "things" include – very conspicuously, it turns out – the narrator himself, who, in "Now that I remember," finishes off by denying his own existence ("No existo yo" [26]), fragmenting himself ("Let my right hand pull my left until I am split in two . . . split in half . . . but holding on by the hands!" [26]), and finally, regenerating ("I was growing roots" [28]). Feeling oneself "unwillingly split into two parts" and "sensing the division as anguish" are cherished notions of the surrealists, notions that dramatize the alienation from self that was typical of a poet like Rimbaud (which is one of the reasons why he was so admired by Breton, and his disconnectedness referred to as "the marvelous wound" [Caws, 16]).

The reference to Rimbaud in the context of split personalities sheds light on Golden Skin's fragmentation when we recall the French poet's well-publicized "Je est un autre," a formula that Asturias will dramatize through animal guardians (*nahuales*; cf. Chapter 2), a character substitution principle, and countless metamorphoses in all of his *neo-Indigenista* fiction. The truth is, if the author of the *Leyendas* latches on to the notions of physical fragmentation and the schizoid personality with such vengeance, it is because he is truly smitten with the process of transformation essential to surrealist hope. The surrealists' scholium, "The age of metamorphosis has begun," is just what the young author wishes to suggest, for, already at this stage of his career, his aim is "a radical transformation of . . . [Guatemala's] past set of values" (Himelblau, "Sociopolitical Views," 75).

In the case of Golden Skin's fragmentation and denial of self, Asturias turns to the notion of polarity in order to describe the process of perpetual transformation. The importance of this process in his fiction likewise explains the leitmotif in this section of the story: "Noise is followed by silence as the sea is by the desert" (26). As Eluard was fond of saying, the expansion of the poetic consciousness depends on the always present possibility of shifting from one extreme to the next. Asturias has this notion in mind when he describes characters that pull and tug at their own limbs until they split themselves in half, although

it is crucial to understand that he was also working on a grand narrative scheme in which the impermanence of all things needed to be emphasized.

Because to the surrealists creation always implies the clash of contraries, it follows that the holocaust described by *Golden Skin* should have rebirth as its sequel. (At this point, the coincidences between Mayan thought and surrealism make themselves apparent once again; the dialectic between creation and destruction in the philosophy of the latter mirrors in every way the cycles of fifty-two years in Mayan culture after which the sacred fire was put out and rekindled in order to represent a new beginning.)²² Coincidences of this type play right into Asturias's masterplan. After describing the neglected cities of the mother culture in "Guatemala," the poet is now suggesting the possibility of a return to or, perhaps more exactly, a revalidation of the culture that has been belittled (literally, "buried") since the days of the colony. The theme of the return of the repressed – that is, of Indian culture – becomes even more evident in the legends that follow.

In the "Leyenda del Volcán," for instance, the goitered pair describes the encounter between two groups of three men: "the three who flew in the wind" and the "three who came on the water." The activities of these men are contrasted throughout the story down to the foods they eat ("Los tres que venían en el viento . . . se alimentaban de frutas"; "los tres que venían en el agua . . . se alimentaban de estrellas" [29]). One other feature distinguishing the two groups is that in order to reach the shore of The Land of the Trees, the men "who come on the water" are forced to slay a creature with golden pupils that hide "two little black crosses" in their midst.

Soon after these men arrive on dry land, the two giants of Mayan lore – Cabrakan and Hurakan – unleash the forces of nature. Volcanoes erupt, the sky suddenly becomes dark, and the now sunless day comes to a halt (31). After a day that "lasted many centuries," Nido is welcomed by a "trinity" that includes "a saint, a white lily and a child" and ordered: "Nido, I want you to build me a temple!" (32). The Earth cries buckets of tears, the volcano's fire goes out, and Nido, who used to be young, comes back as an old man with barely enough time in his hands to build "cien casitas alrededor de un templo" (32).

Asturias's own notes on the legend indicate that the plot depicts a struggle between religions (glossary, 162). The references to "little crosses," to the trinity, to the men who travel across the water, and to Cabrakan and Hurakan further suggest that the struggle depicted is one between Catholicism and Maya-Quiché religion. It is clear, moreover, that the latter is forced to comply with the wishes of the former, signaling the beginning of a submission that lasts until today. Above and beyond capitulation, however, it must be noted that, as was the case in the preceding legend, the holocaust in the "Leyenda del Volcán" is followed by a renewal of all things. After "one day that lasted many centuries," the boiling river cools down and "white lilies bloom" (32). Then the purposefully named "Nido" (whose name clearly indicates his generative proclivity) lays down the foundations for a town of a hundred houses.

Thematically as well as stylistically, the "Leyenda del Volcán" finds its inspiration in the creation myths of the American continent and not in colonial history (as do several of the other tales in the collection). To begin with, the clash between the forces of life and death is central to the narrative development of the *Popol Vuh*; of such a clash, life begins anew, springing from the synthesis of fire and water (represented, in the case of Asturias's legend, by the volcano and the tears shed by the earth). Other features of Asturias's story that recall Maya-Quiché mythology include the reference to the *nahual* (30), the importance accorded to the number three (seven paragraphs in the story begin with the litany "Los tres que venían" [29]),²³ and the insistence on doubles – "¡Son nuestras máscaras, tras ellas se ocultan nuestras caras! ¡Son nuestros dobles, con ellos nos podemos disfrazar!" (30). These doubles, or masks, turn out to be "our mother, our father," recalling the two generations of heroes in the *Popol Vuh* (I am referring to One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu and to the former's offspring, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the gifted twins who repeat or mirror the actions of their ancestors and succeed in defeating the evil lords of the underworld).

Likewise typical of the *Popol Vuh* is the insistence, in Asturias's story, on the notion of similarities ("Las arenas del camino, al pasar él convertíanse en alas" [32]). This linking of any noun to any other in order to widen the scope of language and vision

recalls the twins' use of fireflies in place of fire when they are told to light their cigars without letting them burn down (*Popol Vuh*, 137). Moreover, the analogies between Asturias's legend and Maya-Quiché culture are stylistic as well as thematic. For instance, the secular litanic writing, "Se veía el agua hecha luz en cada hoja, en cada bejuco, en cada reptil, en cada flor, en cada insecto" is likewise characteristic of the style in which the Chichicastenango manuscript is recorded. So is the use of the apostrophe ("The clouds called out his name: Nido! Nido! Nido!" [32]), a device frequently found in the literature of surrealism as well.

The founder and figurehead of Dadaism, Tristan Tzara, was convinced that certain images function as "fils conducteurs" or "conductive threads" (the term is actually Breton's and was coined after Tzara's writings but perfectly conveys the sense of Tzara's original idea) capable of transmitting an electric charge between two elements. Very likely, this wish to combine incongruous elements ("The sand on the road would become wings as he treaded on it" ["Leyenda del Volcán," 32]) and to eliminate the distance separating them determines the use of lists or sentences composed of long series of invocations or supplications often associated with surrealist poetry. It is worthwhile to compare "The three that were coming in the wind," for example, with the following verses by Breton:

Ma femme aux yeux de savane
 Ma femme aux yeux d'eau pour boire en prison
 Ma femme aux yeux de bois toujours sous la hache

Breton's litany is not only a source of rhetorical inspiration for Asturias; there are whole images in this poem (specifically, "Ma femme aux yeux d'eau") that foreshadow what have always been perceived as original formulations of the Guatemalan author (i.e., the "Indians with rainwater eyes" in the first chapter of *Hombres de maíz* [6]). This example readily demonstrates how Asturias absorbs and incorporates the system of reference and imagery of the surrealists as well as their technical apparatus. But it is crucial to note that he learns by listening to the voice of the masters, not by doing what they did. For instance, instead of simply relying on technical devices in order to shock the public and widen the scope of conventional perception, Asturias al-

ways fastens on a didactic message.²⁴ In the case of the “Leyenda del Volcán” he strikes a chord of hope by implicitly suggesting that if destruction is always followed by rebirth, Maya-Quiché culture, buried but not undone, will also have a second coming. It is true that this message is not readily apparent to the reader, however. In fact, the didactic and allegorical content of the *Leyendas* is, like the one in García Márquez’s fiction, far from evident.

It is striking to see how an author who would develop such a heavy hand in later years (in *Week-end in Guatemala*, for instance) was more preoccupied with creating a style and transmitting a perception of a given culture in the *Leyendas de Guatemala* than with catechizing. These short allegorical pieces are so untypically subtle in their message that they have long been regarded as a sort of virtuoso performance that is totally lacking in the kind of political commitment that typifies Asturias’s later work. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we shall see, enforcing a useful lesson is the primordial function of the legends, even if this purpose is partially masked by the flamboyant verbal decoration.

The moral lessons and useful truths continue to develop in the “Leyenda del Cadejo” in which we return to colonial days in order to relate an episode in the life of Elvira de San Francisco, founder of the convent of Santa Catalina. The events depicted – the temptation of the still then novice – take place around the beginning of the seventeenth century. After describing the many spiritual attributes of the young Elvira, the reader learns that one satanic ornament mars her perfection: “the stream of live coals of her braid flickering like an invisible flame” (36). This sinuous coil arouses the lust of the Poppyman, or *hombre-adormidera* (36).²⁵ Mortified by the desire she stirs in him, Elvira cuts off her braid in one fell swoop. As it falls from her head, the live coil becomes a wriggling snake that springs forward with “water rattles” and twists itself around a candle. Once the flame is snuffed out, the Poppyman falls into hell; in this manner – born out of temptation and ready to haunt humanity until the end of time – the “Cadejo” comes to life.

Even though the legend’s title seems to put the vicious bat-faced monster in the limelight, it is evident that the thematic

focus in this story is the struggle between good and evil. This duality is carefully intertwined throughout by means of an elaborate binary system. More than any other legend in this collection, every step of the thematic development in the "Leyenda del Cadejo" is contingent on the interplay of polarities, beginning with the two settings portrayed: "*outside* her window" and "*inside*, in the sweet company of God (my emphasis, 33). For instance, Elvira, while seemingly in full control of her faculties, has the sense of being dead ("tied to the feet of a corpse" and "in her tomb" [which turns out to be her own body] [34]). In spite of her physical and mental confusion, the novice struggles to distinguish between reality and dream once she realizes that the temptation of the Poppy-man is a nightmarish fusion between one of the holy sacraments and the ultimate damnation (i.e., a "diabolical wedding ceremony" [35]). Immediately after, perceiving the damned monster through the dimness of flickering candles, she has the impression that he looks like "a Christ figure . . . that has turned into a bat" (35). Finally, the very emblem of infernal temptation, the braid, becomes a slithering reptile that winds itself around a lighted candle and snuffs it out with its "water rattles" (36). The eight pairs of antithetical, or contrasting, elements – outside/inside, life/death, dream/reality, sacrament/damnation, Christ/bat, braid/reptile, fire/water, man/monster – are brought together at each and every step of the story. Asturias sweeps differences under the mat to create the intensity that is characteristic of the marvelous.

But polarity is not the only technique that allows the author to yoke dissimilar elements; in the "Leyenda del Cadejo" Asturias uses linking devices such as prepositions, commas, and coordinating conjunctions in order to marry the disparate to the incongruous. The Eluard poem that begins "J'établis des rapports entre" sets the tone for the chain of the most startling comparisons in this whole legend: "The sky smelled of sky, the child of child, the field of field, the wagon of hay, the horse of an old rose bush, the man of Saint, the (baptismal) font of shadows, the shadows of the Sabbath and Our Lord's Sabbath of clean clothes." ("Leyenda del Cadejo," 34). To quote Eluard once again, in this passage "tout est comparable à tout." Asturias begins his list identifying elements with their own essence ("the sky smelled of sky") and finishes by likening them to

bodies that are in every way dissimilar ("the horse [smelled] of an old rose bush"). The technique suggests the permeability and interpenetration of elements (and, by extension, of culture); it is crucial to note, however, that discordant unions need not be permanent. Asturias's thrust is to demonstrate, as the Spanish proverb plainly states: *Que la unión por la fuerza no dura*. This message is clearly voiced in Elvira's actions; ridding herself of her braid is not without suggesting that humankind has the means to free itself from the yoke that binds it, no matter how oppressive it might be, and is a conspicuous allusion to the possibility of overcoming Spanish repression of Indian culture.

This reading of Asturias's legend would be just another subjective interpretation were it not for the fact that the author harps on the themes of free will and emancipation with an insistence that can leave no doubt as to his intention. In what is probably the best-known legend included in the 1930 edition, the "Leyenda de la Tatuana," the narrator tells the story of an anthropomorphic almond tree who divides his soul between the four roads or world directions (according to Maya-Quiché cosmogony). Swifter than any of the others, the Black Road (which leads to the underworld, or Xibalbá, in Mayan tradition) swaps the bit of soul it receives with the Merchant of Priceless Jewels. He in turn exchanges it for the most beautiful slave in the world, but never gets a chance to enjoy his new purchase because the roots of a tree take hold of him as if they were "a hand that picks up a stone and throws him in the abyss" (40). Many "moons" later, the slave and Master Almond Tree meet again as though they were "two lovers who have been apart from each other" (40). This time, the Inquisition intervenes and condemns them to die at the stake, he for being a warlock, she, for being possessed by the devil. The night before the execution, however, Master Almond Tree shows the slave how to escape and they both triumph from death.

Of all the legends in the first edition, the most complex, the most sophisticated, and the one Asturias took most pains with is obviously this one. To begin with, it becomes rapidly evident that Master Almond Tree, who "counts the years of four hundred days according to the number of moons he has seen," embodies the natural order typical of Maya-Quiché civilization (37). This order comes up against commercial power ("the

heartless merchants" [39]) and manages to emerge victorious from the struggle after a number of failures. Nature itself takes an active hand in the destruction of mercantile power (it is the roots of a tree that cast the greedy Merchant of Priceless Jewels into the abyss), only to have its emblem made prisoner by the colonial institutions (namely, the Inquisition, representative of foreign power in the New World). In the last installment of the story, Master Almond Tree emerges victorious. "His will is that (the slave) be free like his own thought," so he asks her to draw a little ship on the wall, or on the air, to close her eyes, enter the ship, and leave the prison cell (40). Asturias's message rings loud and clear: Thought, like willpower, is an independent act. No matter how likely it might be to keep the body in chains, making the spirit prisoner is impossible. And the slave is, of course, a bit of Master Almond tree's own spirit, "A tiny bit of his soul" worth more than a whole "lake full of emeralds" (40).

Asturias suggests the fissionability, or *desdoblamiento*, of Master Almond Tree into three transfigurations – tree, soul, and slave – but we must immediately recognize that between each of these incarnations lies a definite space, a difference. They are not one and the same but, rather, sections or parts of a whole so that, being three, they are also one. This equivocalness between one that is three and three that are one is essential to the theme of this folktale. The division between being and consciousness, between a being and the world around it, between a being and its other self, which is both part of a unit and, yet, independent from it, allows Asturias to highlight the most fundamental teaching of this moral lesson: the power of determination, the strength of will. As was the case of Sister Elvira in the earlier legend, in the world described by Asturias it is always possible to break the chain that binds antithetical or rival forces. The soul is not at the mercy of external forces – neither mercantilism, foreign powers, nor arbitrary governments – that try to shape and control it by their own fickleness and vice. On the contrary, Asturias is saying that human beings always have the means to recover their independence. This, and no other, is the caveat of Sister Elvira's self-mutilation, of the slave's escape, and of Master Almond Tree's disappearance from the arbitrarily controlled Inquisition jail.

It is this same moral lesson that is developed in the next tale, the haunting "Leyendas del Sombrerón." Relying on allegorical

language once again, Asturias brings to life the temptation of a monk famous for his piety and religious zeal. One day, a rubber ball bounces into the monk's cell and comes right up to his feet. Touching this foreign body gives him *goces de santo* (holy thrills [43]). He tries to avoid it but the flirtatious little ball always bounces back to him (both the diminutive and the feminine gender are used whenever the ball is alluded to). The monk caresses "her" fruitlike roundness, he delights in "her" erminelike whiteness, and dreams about taking "her" up to his lips. Until one day, a little wiler but not yet wiser he begins to wonder if all this enchantment might not be the devil's doing after all. One morning he has a casual conversation with a lady whose inconsolable son has lost a little ball that, the neighbors assured, "was the spitting image of the devil" (45). Without staying to hear one more word, the monk runs to his cell and throws the ball out the window with his last remaining strength. The ball hits the ground with gleeful bounces like "a freed lamb" and then, alighting once again – as if by magic or the powers of darkness – it spreads its wings and takes on the shape of a big black hat (*Sombrerón*), belonging, it turns out, to Old Scratch himself.

Asturias uses four techniques in developing this haunting tale:

1. *linking* – he establishes and maintains an elaborate nexus among the little ball, the hat, Satan, the child, and the monk.
2. what the surrealists refer to as the *point sublime*, "where the 'yes' and the 'no' meet" or, in other words, the coming together of antithetical figures in the same expression as, for example, "sheep with the heart of a lion" (42);
3. *comparison*, as in "the screams reached out *like* . . . lassoes" (44);
4. *coordinating conjunctions* – the word "and" is used 62 times in the space of four pages.

The aim of these techniques is to demonstrate the polyvalence and ambiguity created on the basis of contrasting elements. In the obviously binary world depicted by Asturias each body coincides and commingles with its own antithesis in typical surrealist fashion. But one of this author's most notorious and yet never mentioned idiosyncrasies is to unravel the seam that stitches the two together after having taken great pains to associate them through a variety of linking devices. In "Leyenda del Cadejo" and "Leyendas del Sombrerón," for example, the first objective is to suggest a marriage of incongruous

elements. Then, after having sketched a world in which each thing is comparable to what least resembles it, Asturias describes how the men and women in his stories are always capable of breaking the ties that bind them to undesirable forces (be it a prison, a little ball, or a braid black as coal). His greatness in this and every instance is tied to personal expression rather than to careful copying. He turns with relish to the arsenal of surrealist techniques, but his stories reveal the depth of his inner vision rather than a purely mechanistic training. After all, writing is not form; it is a way of seeing form. Like the muses, Asturias sets himself as an example by working in solitude after listening to the voice of the masters, not by doing what they have done. All his literature – certainly the *Leyendas* mark but the beginning of this trend – is a project to demonstrate that even the most seemingly conclusive undertakings can be patched and rewoven. It is for this reason that he concludes his first collection of folktales with one that reflects reality and one in which the past, in appearances, at least, seems to be annulled.

The action of the “Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido” (Legend of the Treasure of the Land of Perpetual Bloom) takes place exactly at the time of the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in Guatemala. The entire kingdom of the Lords of Atitlán is celebrating the end of one of many wars. The lake is aglow with the flicker of countless lights, and in the hustle and bustle of the market square the lords mingle with the tradespeople. The morning following the festivities heralds sent by Pedro de Alvarado arrive in Atitlán. Without a moment's hesitation, the Indian chief gives the order to have them executed. Soon after, the alarm is sounded: the volcano, oracle of war and peace, foretells the approach of a vast army. Without giving the people of Atitlán the opportunity to make themselves ready for war, Alvarado's troops fall on them. Part of the tribe flees with the treasure in order to bury it on the slopes of the guardian volcano. But there is not even time to destroy the access roads to the town, and the white men move closer by the minute. At this point, the volcano itself, grandfather of the Waters, comes to the rescue.

As the conquistadors, in hot pursuit of the treasure, make ready to disembark from the improvised canoes readied in the

haste of their greed, the Great Guardian explodes and drenches all things in a stream of fire that is like the "spittle of a giant toad" (50). "Mountains on top of mountains, forests on top of forests, rivers that become streaming waterfalls, rocks by the bundle, flames, ashes, lava, sand, torrents" are spewn by the sacred guardian "to form another volcano right over the treasure of the Lugar Florido, abandoned by the tribe at its feet like a tribute, like a sunset" (50). Another mountain is born on the spot, the legendary Cerro de Oro, or "Golden Hill."

As in all of the folktales, the author begins here by suggesting the seemingly arbitrary but nonetheless established relationships that exist between all elements: The native inhabitants of Guatemala are tellingly linked with the natural world – "people with something like a vegetal nature" (47), "their green arms as vegetal blood" (48), an Indian chief who is "bird and tree" simultaneously (48). There is also a very obvious nexus between Indians and abundance in this story. The sentences describing the activities of the men and women of Atitlán usually take the form of lists in which the wealth and variety of their possessions are highlighted – "There were flowers, fruits, birds, beehives, feathers, gold and expensive stones" (47), their deity Atit's temple is "overflowing with flowers, bunches of fruits" (48).

In contrast, the Spaniards' world is one of shabbiness and shortcomings, of a Spartan parsimony that the author emphasizes through the repeated use of the preposition *sin* (without) as in, "The white men move forward *without* bugles, *without* steps, *without* drums . . . *without* stopping to determine what dangers laid ahead" (my emphasis; 49). Naturally all of these examples of "stinginess" are no more and no less than military strategies that will culminate in an eventual victory for the Spanish, but this does not militate against the fact that the iterative use of a proposition signaling lack is in sharp contrast with the commas and lists that are used to describe the Indians. As history teaches us, the invader is the winner of an uneven struggle; what we learn from the legend, however, is that nature itself rises to defend the legacy of its offspring with "green arms like vegetal blood" (48). The action ends by inviting the reader to draw his or her own conclusions but, actually, the terrain from which our opinions will sprout has been planted like a pregnant syllogism.

In all the legends, as we have seen, the author strives to integrate linking at all levels of the narrative, be it rhetorical or thematic. So, too, in all instances, he spares no effort to stretch the poles that make coalescence possible. The marriage of contraries perpetrated in three of the legends – “Leyenda de la Tatuana,” “Leyenda del Cadejo,” and “Leyendas del Sombrero” – is torn asunder as human beings make use of their power and determination to untie the knot that arbitrarily binds them to a dominating force. Like the first of Asturias’s legends, the last one pictures historical conditions. In both of them Spanish culture (represented by the Inquisition in “Leyenda de la Tatuana” and by the conquistadors in the “Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido”) enfolds and subjugates native culture. Now, then, if Asturias’s basic scheme is to suggest that what is tied can be severed and what is broken mended, isn’t he indicating that native cultures are capable of undoing the yoke that oppresses them? Haven’t we here, in all evidence, the seed of a message that will grow and develop in all the *neo-Indigenista* fiction that this author will write throughout his life?

Resolution as solution

The *Leyendas de Guatemala* reveal their message by means of the contrast between technique (use of linking mechanisms) and theme (emancipation). To begin with, the country that cradles them is portrayed as a palimpsest where present and past, native and Spanish traditions are amalgamated (in “Guatemala”). Immediately, the author teaches us that creation is an element inseparable from destruction (“Now that I remember”) and that destruction is always followed by rebirth (“Leyenda del Volcán”). Having reached this juncture, we learn that human beings are capable of ridding themselves from the burden that oppresses them (“Leyenda del Cadejo”) because the means to do so are always within reach (“Leyenda de la Tatuana” and “Leyendas del Sombrero”). Finally, in the seventh legend, in which the lesson of the first is recapitulated, we learn how the past – the buried treasure of our ancestors – lies intact under the watchful and protective guardianship of nature itself.

Once the teaching of each legend is glossed over, the meaning of the ensemble becomes clear: The country’s cultural pat-

rimony is not lost but neglected. In order to retrieve it, only one thing is needed: resolution. The artist's words will pave the way for the recognition and reinstatement of this safeguarded patrimony.²⁶ Once the men and women of Guatemala grasp his message, their country will enter a new era conceived as an actualization of the past.²⁷ Not surprisingly, this marvelous yet to come is likewise a notion typical of surrealism, which, as Mary Ann Caws notes, is "always turned toward the future" (9). Asturias translates the "Il y aura une fois" of the French avant-garde movement into an *Ayer mañana* ("Yesterday tomorrow at the gates of the labyrinth" [19]) in his own first fable. And it is no coincidence that while describing his homeland he should be specifically future-minded, of course. In the passage that refers to "Ayer mañana," "children's nurses and the enlightened still told (in those days) the popular legends"; it follows, therefore, that the stories no longer circulate or, if they do, their teaching is no longer heeded ("Como se cuenta en las historias que ahora nadie cree" [As is told in the stories that now no one believes; 17]). In that distant "Ayer," which could well be "mañana," "the city went down the street (alejóse) while singing" "the doors of the enchanted treasure were shut," "the flame in the temples was snuffed out" (19). This is far from being a vision of doomsday or even of loss, however. As the narrator wastes no time in assuring us, hope is in the air because, "Todo está como estaba" (All is still as it used to be [19]). In other words, all is ready for the taking, ready for an eventual reinstatement in that *mañana* that Asturias is forecasting in his role as artist-creator.

The optimistic future that he describes as a marriage of past and present and, most specifically, of Indian and Spanish confirms the key role that the *Leyendas* occupy in twentieth-century Latin American literature. In their simultaneous intercession in favor of a disfranchised race and adoption of the narrative grammar and structural devices upon which many pre-Columbian manuscripts rely, they stand as the first recorded work of *neo-Indigenismo*, published eleven years before *Ciro Alegría's El mundo es ancho y ajeno* (1941) and five before *José María Arguedas's Agua* (1935).

Asturias expresses a wish in the *Leyendas* – to see the re-evaluation and redemption of the autochthonous cultures of

Guatemala – that will be carried out twenty years later by two other Guatemalan visionaries; Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz, presidents of the republic between 1945 and 1954. In other words, what is either nostalgia or longing, no matter how strong, in the collection of legends (human beings have all the conditions at hand to undo the burden of oppression and recover their freedom) becomes a *fait accompli* in historical terms and is translated into literature in the second leaf of Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* triptych, *Hombres de maíz*.

What becomes rapidly evident after grasping the sense of the *Leyendas* is that all the major themes Asturias brandishes as an ideological weapon during half a century of professional life are already present in his first great work of fiction. Appropriating the surrealists' arsenal in order to portray what was a personal interest in the native cultures of his homeland he ideates one of the most subtle and ingenious works in the entire literature of the *neo-Indigenismo*. This is why, just as the buried cities that he exalts with such intensity in his own first tale, this nearly forgotten collection of legends deserves to be brought to the light and recognized as the masterpiece it truly is. Not because, in the vaguely condescending words of Paul Valéry, "this short little book" is "the agent of a tropical dream," but, rather, because it harmonizes idealism, Mayan mythology, and surrealist techniques into a complex literary language. The result is unprecedented, which is why we can affirm with Marc Cheymol, "We haven't found in any of [Asturias's] work – least of all in the *Leyendas de Guatemala* – the slightest temptation to say things European style" (my translation; "*Années folles*," 212).

The sifting of ancient times

The ink on the 1930 edition of the legends was still wet when Asturias was already busy writing new ones; as a matter of fact, an affinity for this literary genre was to stay with him throughout his life. After completing the original seven and busily searching for an ideal vehicle to translate his own account of "la expresión americana," the author turns to pre-Columbian theatre. Using the *Apu Ollantay* and the *Rabinal Achí* as models, he writes a first version of a play entitled "Cuculcán" that will not appear in its definitive form until the 1948 edition of the *Leyendas de Guatemala* is published in Buenos Aires.²⁸ At about

the same time, he is also writing "Tres de cuatro sueños," a story that will be published in French by the Editions Cahiers du Sud in 1933 and expanded as "Los brujos de la tormenta primavera" in the 1948 Buenos Aires edition of the *Leyendas*.

Marc Cheymol feels that *Rayito de estrella*, published separately in 1929, should also be included among these new legends. The French critic sees a "structural and thematic kinship" among all of the legends ("*Années folles*," 177), but I emphatically disagree with him on this point. To me, the seven stories in the 1930 Oriente edition constitute a coherent whole; they are pieces of a puzzle meant to be read together. Later additions to the collection – craftsmanship and human interest notwithstanding – do not add to the singularity of the original message; they stand apart from the cohesion and interplay of the first seven because both their aim and semantic content are different.

Because my first objective in this book was to unveil the sum and substance of a seldom studied work as it was conceived – that is to say, as one piece made up of interrelated elements – I have not included "Cuculcán" and "Los brujos de la tormenta primavera" in the section where I discuss the 1930 edition. This choice was made once I realized that the first cluster of folktales was in every way a coded injunction to the people of Guatemala, an injunction that addresses the problem of the repressed Indian legacy and posits a congress of cultures as the rigging for the country's new identity. The legends that are written after 1930 corroborate and nuance the original message by going one step beyond it. In 1930, Asturias teaches that the country's past needs to be exhumed. The legends that follow do exactly that: They dramatize the wealth and variety of the Maya-Quiché legacy by turning to one of America's earliest recorded sources, the *Popul Vuh*.

To this day, there is a very select group of diviners in Mayan country called "daykeepers." Their function is to interpret illnesses, omens, and dreams given by sensations internal to their own bodies and the multiple rhythms of time. It is their business to bring what is dark into "white clarity," just as the gods of the *Popul Vuh* brought the world itself to light. It would not be an exaggeration to say that when the Indians of Guatemala referred to Miguel Angel Asturias as Tecún Umán, the cultural hero who defended them against Alvarado, they were aware

that he, too, was seeking that “white clarity.” Western readers – more pragmatic and, regrettably, much less informed about the ancient lore of Mesoamerica – look at Asturias’s self-appointed role from a more skeptical perspective and wonder, first of all, how much mythology this newcomer to cultural anthropology really had.

Asturias’s familiarity with the Maya and their culture will become evident as we embark on an analysis of “Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral,” “Cuculcán,” *Hombres de maíz*, and, to a lesser degree, *Mulata de tal*; but in view of the fact that the *Popol Vuh* enters directly into our present discussion, this might be a good place to give some inkling of the *Gran Lengua*’s bag of tricks.

Animals play an important role in Asturias’s *neo-Indigenista* fiction, most notably, in the 1949 saga that portrays the return to a patriarchal agrarian community. And yet, to my knowledge, no one has satisfactorily explained why two of the three main Indian characters in this work have possum and coyote as their respective *nahuales* (the spiritual essence or character of a person, animal, plant, stone, or geographic place). To grasp the reason for this we need to compare several translations of the *Popol Vuh* or Chichicastenango manuscript. The first that comes to mind, being the most obvious, is the Asturias-González de Mendoza version done under the direction of Georges Raynaud and published in 1927 as *Los dioses, los héroes y los hombres de Guatemala antigua*. In this version, the fundamental account of how things “were put in shadow and brought to light” (in other words, how things were created) is ascribed to “los Constructores, los Formadores, los Procreadores, los Engendradores; sus nombres: Maestro Mago del Alba, Maestro Mago del Día (Gran Cerdo del Alba, dominadores, Poderosos del Cielo” [11]). In contrast, in the well-known and often quoted Adrián Recinos version, the opening passage of the Chichicastenango manuscript is translated as “Y aquí traeremos la manifestación, la publicación y la narración de lo que estaba oculto, la revelación por Tzacol, Bitol, Alom, Qaholom, que se llaman Hunahpú-Vuch, Hunahpú-Utiú” (21).

It is evident, even from these few lines, that Recinos takes the easy way out with honorary titles, forms of address, and proper nouns – he leaves them in Quiché. Whereas Asturias – bound

and tied to Georges Raynaud's French translation – leaves in his own Spanish version a number of ambiguities for the uninitiated reader (for example, who is “Maestro Mago”?). Other English and French versions slip into either or both of these pitfalls, omitting key words or failing to translate them. Aficionados of Mayan mythology and students of *Hombres de maíz* have had to wait until Dennis Tedlock's authoritative translation to have the cobwebs removed from both the seemingly hermetic opening of the Chichicastenango manuscript and Asturias's choice of animals for his splendid novel.

Tedlock translates the opening passage of the *Popol Vuh* in the following terms: “things were put in shadow and brought to light by the Maker, Modeler, named Bearer, Begetter, Hunahpú Possum, Hunahpú Coyote” (71).²⁹ The identity of the Master Magician (i.e., the sun and corn god, Hunahpú) is now clear. More to the point in terms of our own research, Tedlock's translation reveals the source of the *nahuales* in *Hombres de maíz*. For reasons that will be elucidated in Chapter 2 of this book, Asturias wanted to clothe his three Indian heroes (Gaspar Ilóm, Goyo Yic, and Nicho Aquino) in finery borrowed from the Mayan sun and corn god. What is most interesting is that he was obviously aware of the meaning of *hunahpú uuch* and *hunahpú utiú* even though the names of possum and coyote are absent from his own translation of *Los dioses, los héroes y los hombres de Guatemala antigua*. It is also evident that he knew possum was a god of dawn (Maestro Mago del Alba), which is why he links this animal to the beginning of a new era and to the color white, or *zac*, in his own novel (*Zacatón* is the patronymic of the eight beheaded members of María Tecún's family in *Hombres*; see Chap. 6, 53–54). Asturias's acquaintance with Mayan mythology and language does not stop here, of course; many of the names for his characters are taken verbatim from Quiché or Cakchiquel sources. For instance, the word *Chiltic*, which in Quiché means “to go on stilts” (Tedlock, 367), becomes Celestino Yumi's name when this character is turned into an acrobat reduced to looking at the world from the height of his wooden poles (*Mulata de tal*, I, 11).

Even the alliterations used are often inspired by precedent. For instance, at the opening of Chapter 10 of *Hombres de maíz* the blind man Goyo Yic calls out the name of his runaway wife.

In a syllabic chain that recalls the verbal swagger of *El señor presidente*, Asturias spells out Goyo's howling lamentation as "María TecúúúUUUn! . . . María TecúúúUUUn!" (103). This vocalic choice, seemingly gratuitous at first sight, becomes clear only in the light of a reference system in which Asturias was clearly schooled. The fact is, in Mayaland, "U" is the glyph for the moon, and María – this will be crucial to the development of the novel – is linked to this heavenly body (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 241).

These examples of Asturias's integration of Mayan material into his works of fiction provide concrete evidence that the author was indeed acquainted with both the sphere of action of Mesoamerican gods and Quiché vocabulary (even though he was far from being fluent in any languages of the Mayan family). Evidence of this familiarity has never been sufficiently provided. Nor has the fact that Asturias builds his literary language as a palimpsest but endows it with a message that is purely his own. In other words, the role of Mayan myth in his *neo-Indigenismo* is either vehicular (i.e., recast to serve the author's own ends) or structural (used to tie together elements of the action), but never a mere duplication or transcription of the original.

The transmutation of original sources shines through as early as the "Leyenda del Volcán" and the "Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido" but doesn't become obvious or used as a bona fide system of reference until "Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral." In this legend the seventeenth-century priests, nuns, and mystics who weave their way through the pages of the Oriente edition are left behind, one and all, by characters borrowed from Maya-Quiché mythology. Like the *Popol Vuh*, or "Council Book," this legend begins in darkness; the cosmos is inhabited only by supernatural creatures and the action travels forward in time to the creation of the natural world and of the first humans. With biblical hindsight, and wielding the wand of the creator with brio, Asturias divides the action of the story into seven parts. It begins with a pair of undifferentiated deities ("él no se diferenciaba en nada, era de tan buena agua nacida") named Juan and Juana Poyé (92)³⁰ and continues with the genesis of plant life and the creation of minerals, animals, the first men, the second, perfected, human beings, and religion.

We know that in the *Popol Vuh* the gods create humanity at the same time they create the earth, but a great deal of time passes before they succeed in actually making human beings who are physically and ethically able. This is just what happens in “Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral.” In addition, there is ample evidence to suggest that Asturias borrows features from the Mayan god Hurakan, or Hunrakan, in order to cast his Juan Poyé. Hurakan is the god who causes the rain and floods that end the era of the wooden people in the *Popol Vuh*; his aspects or manifestations include thunderbolt gods and the first-ranking patron deity of the Quiché (i.e., Tohil). His epithets include Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth and his name, *hufn]rakan*, literally means “one-his-leg.” In a different but related context, the expression *rakan hab* means “the drops of a rainstorm when it begins or ends.” Thus, *hun rakan* or *huracan* could be an abbreviated form of a phrase meaning “one large raindrop.” All of these readings point to the classic Mayan god who is one-legged and causes torrential rainstorms. Another name for this god is Tahil, “Torch Mirror” or “Obsidian Mirror.” This name, together with the one-leggedness and his rains make him cognate in turn with the Nahua god Tezcatlipoca or “Smoking Mirror,” who was (among other things) a god of the hurricane (Tedlock, 343). As for Juan Poyé, we learn that “a mere drop of his measureless flow engendered the rains which birthed in turn all navigable rivers. His grandchildren” (94).³¹

Although many of Juan Poyé’s features mirror those of the Mayan god of the hurricane, “one-his-leg” is misrepresented by Asturias in at least one respect. Instead of having only one leg, the creation god in “Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral” is portrayed with a missing arm, a “brazo-mano que le faltaba” (91) (*ab* means both “hand” or “arm” in Quiché, which explains the ordinarily not hyphenated noun in Spanish). However, Asturias does not relinquish the traditional Nahua epithet *Espejo de azogue* in referring to his first protagonist (“espejos escamosos de azogue,” or scaly quicksilver mirrors, [93]). At the end of the first installment, a whole mountain falls on Juan Poyé; only his head remains, “tossing and turning amidst the foaming riverrun hair,” as a generative organ that begets plant life – “los troncos, las hojas, las flores, los frutos” – and eventually, his

own grandchildren, the rivers of the world, which are the "offspring of the rain" (94).

The narrator announces starkly, at this point of the story, "The news of Juan Poyé-Juana Poyé ends here, it seems" (94) and moves on to describe the nurturing rivers and the struggle between "the Cactus and the Gold" (95). Then, finally, amidst the relentless onslaught of the rain, the silent murmur of the minerals becomes audible like a dream that facilitates "the second coming of Cristalino Brazo de la Cerbatana," another fluvial deity, who is, metaphorically speaking, the missing arm of Juan Poyé (which this character has described earlier in the action: "the missing arm, it had just been removed and how ticklish to transfer one's movement to the crystalline arm of the blowgun" [91]).

Asturias's choice of nomenclature might have seemed arbitrary and his reference to Mayan myths purely idle. The truth is, most narrative elements in this legend have an origin in the *Popol Vuh* and all serve a purpose. "Blowgun Arm," for instance, is very possibly Hun-ahpú, whose Quiché name can be loosely translated as "One Blowgunner" (Domingo de Basseta, "Vocabulario en lengua quiché"); like his father before him, "One Blowgunner" loses his head and, as Tedlock explains, "his detached head is probably the evening-star aspect of Venus" (342). References to Mayan cosmogony are few in Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* fiction, but he did know enough about Hunahpú to describe the vertebrae of his character Cristalino Brazo as "the bones of a voracious little fish" (95), an animal that is another of the sun god's earthly manifestations (Tedlock points out that "catfish barbels are shown coming out of the cheeks of the classic Maya equivalent of Hunahpu" [330]). Hunahpú is also the name of one of the volcanoes made by Zipacná in the Chichicastenango manuscript, and the *Chilam Balam* even describes this character as standing next to a mountain known as "Fire mouth" (probably the volcano Amatenango). This is no doubt why Asturias's Cristalino Brazo brings with him "the new struggle, the new fire, the solar heat, the burning . . . amidst sulphurous emanations" (95).

Fire and water are thus conjoined in Asturias's tale, and out of this marriage of opposites the first animal is born and, not long after, the "maize-footed" Chorro de Horizontes takes his

first wavering step on the face of the earth. The first city is founded and is called Serpiente con Chorro de Horizontes, not surprisingly, since the god Tohil, in one of his manifestations as "the mannikin scepter," is portrayed as having only one leg and the other, when present, takes the form of a serpent (Thompson, *Maya History and religion*, 225–226). This suggests, according to Tedlock, "that Tohil may be a manifestation of Hurricane or Hurakan (which literally means "One Leg," as we already know [300]). There seems to be enough evidence to affirm that Asturias was well aware of this homology between Tohil-Hurakan, and this would explain why he names the begetter of corn Cristalino Brazo and the first city Serpiente con Chorro de Horizontes. Both the arm and the serpent-leg enter his story as fertile elements from the fragmented body of the foundational forebear, Hurakan-Hunahpú. The progressive evolution from this god to Tohil as the central figure of "Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral" further corroborates Asturias's knowledge of the homology among all three gods.

But before we get to that part of the action, Chorro de Horizontes strips himself of the finery of war in order to display his sexual proclivity and for nine days preceding the full moon he drinks the broth of nine white hens daily until he is ready "to have the breath of a woman under his chest" (96).³² Once pregnant, the woman drops a maize flower at Chorro de Horizontes's feet, a clear sign of this character's filiation with the sun-corn god and likewise a reference to the mountain or citadel in the *Popol Vuh* where the Makers and Modelers get the corn and water needed to make the bodies of the first true humans (i.e., *Pan paxil, pan cayala*, IV, 1). In other words, everything in the action of Asturias's story up to this point has been geared toward the portrayal of the antithetical elements (fire and water) which commingle (as sun and moon) in order to beget corn, the sacred substance from which the first four men are created (cf. Chapter 2, the section "Burning Water," for a more detailed discussion of this section of the *Popol Vuh*).

But the first men in Asturias's story, as the imperfect creations in the Chichicastenango manuscript, do not live by the book. They fail to respect the precedent set forth by Chorro de Horizontes, in fact; they forget the "laws for making love in the mountains" and they have "the breath of woman under their

chests" even when the moon is a crescent. Worst of all, they are cruel to all creatures. For this reason, their children are born sickly and scared, with legs that can be braided together like a soft pretzel. They are beings made of dribble who perish when attacked by an army of warring spiders. Only the river, el Río de las Garzas Rosadas, remains to tell the story of past glories.

It is at this point that Asturias takes the greatest liberties with the *Popol Vuh*. Limited by the scope of the short story format and aiming to deliver a very specific didactic message, he condenses the four creations in the Maya-Quiché manuscript into two. Broadly speaking, we could say that the *Popol Vuh* contains three long tales with many subdivisions and significant asides; the first two – the creation myth and the story of One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu and their children Hunahpu and Xbalanque – are framed within each other. By this I mean that after forming the earth, separating mountains from water, and creating animals, the gods command these newly made creatures to speak and praise them. When they fail, the animals are punished; henceforward they will be killed and their flesh eaten. The gods attempt a second time to make “a giver of praise, giver of respect, provider, nurturer” and use mud to shape its body, but they fail miserably as their creatures quickly dissolve in the water (*Popol Vuh*, 79). They then turn to a pair of divine grandparents – Xpiyacoc and Xmucané – probably older than all the other gods and very similar in many respects to Juan Poyé and Juana Poyé (they are symbolically androgynous, two complementary and undifferentiated bodies) – and ask whether making the first men out of wood is a well-founded choice. The grandparents give their assent but, in spite of it, the creators fail for the third time.

Instead of continuing the tale that culminates with the creation of the first able men and women, the author(s) of the Chichicastenango manuscript open a narrative parenthesis. Parts II and III describe the eventful adventure of Hunahpu and Xbalanque until its culmination: the twins' ascension to heaven, one as sun, the other as moon. Only at this point is the creation myth taken up again, and this time the gods make no mistake: They use corn “for the flesh of the human work, the human design” (part IV, 163).

Once men and women have been created, the third narrative tale – relating the migrations of the Quiché families and the origins of human sacrifice – can unfold. The purpose of all the material leading up to part IV has been to pinpoint the genealogy of the Quiché people and to outline the behavioral features that shall be considered praiseworthy in this culture. The archetypal role of Hunahpu and Xbalanque will be to embody these features and to serve as a paragon for the descendants of the first men of maize that are created through their agency.

Asturias condenses the three failed creations into one, so his own story is perfectly symmetrical: The men and women who fail to live by the model set forth by the gods and are cruel are exterminated; those born out of the waning moon and living in the City of the Invisible Goddess of the Doves of Absence endure because they abide by the Laws of Love. Their existence is comparable to that of the Quiché in that it is not absent from toil or trouble, however. They, too, are forced to migrate and live like nomads (“No se supo a qué venía todo aquel milagro de la vida errante, huidiza” [100]); they, too, are attacked by animals – pumas, jaguars, and coyotes whose bloodthirstiness and cruelty mirror those of Sudden Bloodletter and Tearing Jaguar, the monsters that end the era of the wooden people in the *Popol Vuh*. The women in Asturias’s story take the helm at this point (we will see how this becomes a set pattern of his *neo-Indigenista* fiction); they vanquish the monsters and establish a matriarchal kingdom that corresponds, historically speaking, to the preclassic era of Maya-Quiché civilization. But this brave new breed begins to forget that it is a “fictitious creation” and decides to entertain thoughts of immortality. Witnessing this new excess of human folly, the gods allow the river to lick *Serpiente con Chorro de Horizontes* off its foundation until it disintegrates in the water “like the ancient cities made of reflections” (102). Vegetation begins encroaching and finally engulfs everything in its path. Vague news of these first cities still circulate, but their ruins have been swallowed up by the jungle and even the ancient gods are covered up by millenarian mosses, lichens, and reeds. “And thus,” the story concludes, “people lost their intimate contact with the gods, the soil and woman, it seems” (103).

Asturias's message is distinctly twofold in this story: On the one hand, the action of "Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral" reiterates the lesson to be drawn from the "Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido": The legacy of earlier civilizations has been buried and forgotten. It is essential to keep in mind that the second breed of humans is *not* exterminated by the gods, however. The moral teaching of "Los brujos" is similar to that of the "Leyenda del tesoro" because the author takes pains to point out how chaos ensues when men and women disobey the grand design of the universe. Civilizations die (like the inhabitants of the Ciudad de Serpiente con Chorros de Horizontes) for being cruel and "meek-hearted" (97). The jab at his own countrymen is fully intended, of course, although much more subtle than Jorge Icaza's or Alcides Arguedas's. But like these writers (and all *Indigenistas*, for that matter), Asturias fails to suggest a solution for circumventing human folly and the multicultural dilemma of his homeland at this stage of his career.

Be that as it may, one thing is certain: The "Leyenda de los brujos de la tormenta primaveral" contains the structural germ of a much more ambitious project, one in which a solution is suggested. I refer to *Hombres de maíz*. What Asturias discovers in writing "Los brujos" is the astounding evidence that he can forgo the sacrosanct narrative elements that typify Western literature: time, place, and character. In his palimpsest of the *Popol Vuh* he shifts from one setting to the next, heroes and gods – like Juan and Juana Poyé – enter and disappear from the action within a few pages. What allows such sleight-of-hand and, to boot, coherent results that do not collapse like a house of cards is intertextuality, essentially that the narration moves forward both on the basis of an established model (the *Popol Vuh*) and an association of elements that mirrors their sphere of action in Mayan mythology. To tell the story of creation and destruction Asturias dramatizes the fruitful role of fire and water and grounds the action on a "character-substitution principle" that is very similar to the one in his model text.

In the *Popol Vuh*, characters symbolize behavior patterns; the struggle between good and evil is meant as a teaching tool, and protagonists in the action profit from the trials and errors of those before them. For instance, in part III, don't One and Seven Hunahpu leave their legacy of experience to Hunahpu

and Xbalanque, unborn when the lords of Xibalbá (the Maya underworld) defeat them?³³ When the father and uncle of the twins arrive in the underworld for a ball match with One and Seven Death, they fail in the trials set by the evil lords and are unable to call them by name. They are sent to spend the night inside Dark House – the first trial – and given a lit torch and cigars with the condition they both be returned unconsumed in the morning. But One and Seven Hunahpu, guileless in every respect, burn the torch to the ground and finish the cigars. Before the day is over, they are sacrificed and buried by One and Seven Death. Readers accept such a staggering turn of events in a mythic tale, but what would happen if the protagonist of a modern novel were to die and disappear from the action after the first few chapters?

Aiming to renew the art of storytelling by actualizing the models set forth in the literary tradition of his homeland, Asturias does just that in *Hombres* and *Mulata*, which is why both works have been controversial and misunderstood. Furthermore, the character-substitution principle that becomes operative in these novels is already present in “Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral” where Cristalino Brazo de la Cerbatana steps into the shoes of Juan and Juana Poyé only to be superseded by Chorro de Horizontes and, finally, by the misguided human beings who end up losing “intimate contact with the gods” (103). Protagonists fade from the action despite the centrality of their role, but all characters are shown to be related to each other as manifestations or incarnations of the same god. For example, Juan Poyé is the father of the rains and all rivers on the surface of the earth are his grandchildren. Cristalino Brazo, whose hair is made up of “bubble-roots in the sleepwalking water” (95), and Chorro de Horizontes, whose maize feet have been molded by the seaweed, are obviously his descendants and a prolongation of his persona (96). And, lest we forget, Cristalino Brazo brings with him “the solar heat,” “the new fire” (95). It is this marriage of opposites (sun and rain, fire and water) that allows the growth of the vegetal world and, more to the point, the fluorescence of the maize plant that Chorro de Horizontes embodies (he has “maize feet”; in addition, his hands have “*nervaduras de hojas*,” “the leaves that stamped their vegetal origin in them as if they were corn *tamales*” [96]). The

plot of the legend is further set because all immortal protagonists turn out to be manifestations of the same Maya-Nahua god, Hurakan-Hunahpu-Tohil, and the men and women who the gods create are, likewise, extensions of themselves who receive the dubious gift of free will.

In Chapter 2 we see how in *Hombres* all Indian characters are associated with water, whereas *ladinos* are systematically linked with fire. We will likewise see the thematic nexus that ties together Gaspar, Goyo, and Nicho and links all three with the corn god Hunahpu. It is for this reason that we can suggest at this point that "Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral" is the stepping-stone that allows the Nobel Prize author to engineer the structuring principles for his most complex and misunderstood novel. In other words, it is in this legend that he puts to the test the creative elements upon which his fame deserves to rest.

As "Los brujos" is the drawing board for the character-substitution principle, "Cuculcán" is the testing ground for the association of elements that will become the structural backbone of the *neo-Indigenista* novels. But the 1933 play is a much more transitional work than its companion legend about the creation of man. In terms of technique, it harks back to surrealism, and the interweaving of Mayan material and didactic intent that typifies the author's mature style is not nearly as evident in this instance as it is in the short story we have just discussed. "Cuculcán" simply lacks the many-layered complexity of "Los brujos" and is saturated with literary affectations reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and Maeterlinck's *Péleas and Mélisande*. This is not to say that Asturias turns his back on Mayan sources. It simply means that he uses them more as a backdrop than as an allegorical device meant to illustrate a moral lesson. The truth is that his first play gets somewhat away from him and his well-known penchant for decoration and fustian wordplay take the upper hand.³⁴

The action of "Cuculcán" is orchestrated by means of three sets of three "curtains" ("acts," technically speaking, but also an actual fabric backdrop that changes color as the action unfolds). The different colored curtains – yellow, red, and black – are designed to represent the different moments in the sun's journey (dawn, midday, and night).³⁵ The play also has three

main characters: Cuculcán or Plumed Serpent, Guacamayo (Seven Macaw or Uucub Cakix in the *Popol Vuh*), and a warrior-attendant to Cuculcán named Chinchibirín.

The action opens with a dialogue between Cuculcán and Guacamayo in which the former maintains, "I am like the Sun!" while Macaw counters, "You are the Sun," and describes his godly trappings, his circular palace, his morning, afternoon, and evening gardens (104). Guacamayo flatters Cuculcán to his face, but he changes tunes behind his back. When alone with the loyal Chinchibirín, the hypocritical Macaw claims that "nothing exists" and that even the sun is a reflection that doesn't travel a full orbit around the earth but sets at the very point where it rises (114). Such astounding affirmations provoke an argument between Guacamayo and the Yellow Archer Chinchibirín, who threatens to kill the offending liar. Disgusted, he calls him a "faker" (*farsante* [113]) and insults him for his inclination to "play with words that lie" (*palabras engañadoras* [113]).

Guacamayo's fabrication hinges on the notion that the sun's journey is reflected on a giant heavenly mirror. Tricked by a paltry reflection, all living things believe that Cuculcán sails forth across the horizon when, in truth, he begins journeying back to his starting point after reaching the zenith. Learning that Guacamayo's nickname is Gran Saliva de Espejo Engañador (Cheating Mirror's Great Spittle) sheds light on the moorings for his specious argument. By suggesting that the sun reflects himself on a "cheating mirror," Guacamayo lets it be understood that the god is but a satellite, an image of the true heavenly sphere who is no other than himself, Cheating Mirror.

This kind of fanfaronade perfectly echoes this character's behavior in the *Popol Vuh*. In the Maya-Quiché manuscript, Seven Macaw is the lord who falsely claims to be both sun and moon until he causes great offense to Hunahpu and Xbalanque (part II). The twins end up shooting him with their blowguns and "breaking" his mouth (91-4); they later pull out his teeth and substitute them with grains of white corn, which is why macaws have a toothless and ragged-edged beak to this day.

The difference between the macaw in the *Popol Vuh* and the one in Asturias's play is that the latter's braggadocio is never

found out and, therefore, never punished. The character who does suffer defeat in "Cuculcán" is the loyal Chinchibirín, who, unlike Macaw, fights for his beliefs: "It is beautiful to defend with words," he argues, "what can be tasted with the sharp knife of sight" (133). Like Elvira de San Francisco in the "Leyenda del Cadejo," Chinchibirín is a paragon of virtues with an Achilles' heel: He is in love with a beautiful maiden named Yaí, or Yellow Flower, who has already been promised to Cuculcán.³⁶

In Asturias's legend the sun god has a different maiden each night; after spending a few hours with him, the chosen woman is whisked away from the palace bed and sacrificed to avoid pregnancies and unwanted offspring (137). Scheming to take Cuculcán's place, the conniving Guacamayo tries to convince the next hapless victim, who turns out to be Yaí, that she must get rid of the "false" sun when he least expects it. He begins by telling her that Cuculcán's empire is all illusion, including the soon to take place tryst with her: "Cuculcán . . . será una sombra inexistente en el momento del amor" (he will be a non-existent shadow in the moment of love [139]). Yaí simply laughs at him. Then Guacamayo informs her that she will be sacrificed after one night of love; at this point, her resolve begins to waver. But what finally tilts the balance in favor of Macaw's plan to have Cuculcán killed is hearing that she is loved by the Yellow Archer Chinchibirín. Apparently convinced by the captious arguments, Yaí decides to abide by Macaw's suggestion and destroy the sun with a spell he promises to teach her.

The time for their night together arrives; both Yaí and Cuculcán seem bewitched and everything indicates that Guacamayo's scheme will be successful. However, in the last installment of the Second Black Curtain, we learn that Cuculcán has been saved on the brink of madness ("woman is madness. She is the tarantula's bite" [108]) by a wise old lady named la Abuela de los Remiendos (Granny Patch).

The last three curtains bring together the lying Macaw and the trustworthy Chinchibirín for the last time. Macaw laughs at the Yellow Archer's unrequited summoning of Yellow Flower; obviously, the maiden has disappeared from sight. And yet, in the last scene, Chinchibirín seems to hear her answer his summons. Struggling to reach her haunting voice within his own

body, he tears his chest open. The moon sallies forth from the wound as he falls lifeless to the ground.

The dramatic ending of this practically unstageable play (the special effects are more the stuff of cinema than of theater) evokes the birth of the satellite according to postcolonial legend; the story is doubtlessly haunting, and the rivalry between the characters creates the kind of scenic tension that might have made the play successful. But Asturias's didactic intention is not as evident as it is in his earlier tales, and the action tends to meander and finally fizzle out in the last three curtains. Was "Cuculcán" conceived as sheer entertainment, one wonders? Is it possible that, for once, the most moralistic of authors does not encode a moral lesson under the allegorical veil?

Clearly, we witness in this retelling of the rivalry between the Plumed Serpent and the deceitful Macaw the *quid pro quo* between good and evil that typifies all the legends. But Asturias's intention is enigmatic, doubtlessly because he was working with a new genre and allowed himself to be mesmerized by the visual effects and the impact the stylized script would have on the public. In contrast with other tales, in "Cuculcán" good and loyalty are punished, not rewarded. The conniving Macaw almost succeeds in thwarting the order of the universe and squawks lightheartedly to the end, suggesting that hypocrisy and falsehood are integral elements of the cosmos.

Actually, the play's technique is of much greater interest than the content in allowing us to form an idea of Asturias's developing style. To begin with, and firmly adhering to the surrealists' stock-in-trade, one of the most often used words in the First Yellow Curtain is the comparative adjective "like" (*como*). Guacamayo begins by telling Cuculcán, "Tu palacio de forma circular, *como* el palacio del Sol" (your circular palace, *like* the Sun's [my emphasis; 104]) and later in the action the fruits "run *like* rabbits" and the rabbits suckle the papaya trees, "*like* fruits" (my emphasis; 107). Asturias's insistence on similarity has the same theoretical basis as Breton's technique of linking one noun to any other to expand the scope of language. It is probably this theory of analogies and the desire to combine elements of vision that determine the repetitive, or "secular litanic," form so often to be found in "Cuculcán" as well as in the work of all the surrealists. For instance, Asturias's play begins with a series of

apostrophes and lists that become codified as leitmotifs: “¡Eres el Sol, acucuác, tu palacio . . . tiene . . . jardines para la mañana, para la tarde, para la noche! . . . ¡Acucuác, eres el Sol, en tu palacio de los tres colores: el amarillo de la mañana, el rojo de la tarde, el negro de la noche! . . . ¡Eres el Sol, acucuác, eres el Sol!” (You are the Sun, acucuác, your palace . . . has . . . morning gardens, afternoon gardens, evening gardens! . . . Acucuác, you are the Sun, in your three-colored palace: the yellow of morning, the red of afternoon, the black of night! . . . You are the Sun, acucuác, you are the Sun! [104]). Asturias moves beyond the litanies of the First Yellow Curtain by linking one narrative element with another on the basis of their sphere of action in Mayan mythology. For instance, in the first curtain, Cuculcán declares: “Mis rayos se convierten en brillantes avispas y vuelo a los panales, para luego seguir adelante, vestido del amarillo de mi imagen que sale del agua sin mojarse y de los panales sin quemarse, a que la mordisqueen, hambre y caricia, de los dientes de maíz de las mazorcas” (my rays become shiny wasps and I fly to the hives and move on, dressed in the yellow of my image which leaves the water without getting wet and the hives without burning and allows itself to be bitten, hunger and caress, by the corn teeth of the cobs [105]).

In this passage, the association between sun and rays, wasps, hives, the color yellow, water, fire, and corn is perfectly circular and profoundly logical on the basis of Mayan mythology because the sun is likewise the corn god.³⁷ Corn appears in the *Popol Vuh* only after Hunahpu and Xbalanque ascend to heaven, one as sun (emblem of fire), the other as moon (minister of rain).³⁸ The marriage of contraries produces the element of creation, which is likewise the constitutive substance of Hunahpu. In other words, sun begets corn, which is exactly the outcome of Asturias's logical chain (this particular section of the *Popol Vuh* is studied in greater detail in Chapter 2).

At the same time that Asturias re-creates a nexus based on the Mayan mythic tradition, he renews language by substituting images in a perpetually revivifying chain that responds in every way to Breton's postulation. According to the high priest of surrealism, anything once known can no longer seem miraculous. The task of the artistic eye and the poetic imagination is to perceive and express only novel relationships between the

most heterogeneous entities and thus destroy forever "the false laws of conventional juxtaposition" (*First Manifesto*, 63). It is for this reason that the author of *L'Amour Fou* begs for "the free and unlimited play of analogies," the only possible key to the mental prison in which we have shut ourselves (*First Manifesto*, 65). As Caws maintains, "The surrealist universe is above all a changing one, full of metamorphosis and extreme variation" (27). The chain of sun-wasps-yellow-fire-water-corn in the opening curtain of "Cuculcán" emphasizes the mobility implied in analogical perception while suggesting, at the same time, the multifarious avatars of the Mayan sun god.

The surrealist-inspired origins of "Cuculcán" are, likewise, conspicuous in Asturias's choice of imagery. The entire play revolves around three elements that are fundamental components of the surrealist arsenal: sun, bird, and mirrors. The poetry of Tzara and Eluard is replete with references to the sun, which both poets consider the emblem of "plénitude." The bird is like the sun in that it easily soars beyond all mortal shadows; it is also capable of maintaining its own individual "forme éclore/Et son plaisir/Parmi tant d'oiseaux á venir" (Eluard). Caws indicates how, for the surrealists, "the bird exemplifies pure freedom and constant revelation of light as Eluard's verse makes evident: 'Un bel oiseau nu montre la lumière'" (28). This association between the bird that soars like the sun and is linked to the light is likewise exploited by Tzara, who describes "la lumière des oiseaux" and gives the bird his highest form of praise by suggesting that it radiates the brightness of the natural world: "Le vol durci d'acier d'un oiseau oblique/d'hiver est son remous de diamant/le bec tirant de son crissement acide sur le verre dépoli" (*L'Homme approximatif*, 1931, 104). The association between the bird and the reflecting surface ("verre dépoli") is by no means unique to this verse or, for that matter, to this poet; as Tzara compares the bird's beak to the hard luster of diamond, Breton imagines this animal as "a prism of light."

We also know from Caws that Eluard dreads all that contradicts light, such as walls and shadows, which he considers to be "the absolute denial of reflection and of potential multiplicity" (162). Consequently, this poet is drawn to all reflecting agents – anything that permits seizing and maintaining images

in sight, a fact that would explain his well-known fascination with mirrors and eyes.

The trinity at the core of Asturias's "Cuculcán" marries the three elements that are obsessive figurations in the poetry of Tzara, Breton, and Eluard: The bird is like the light of the sun because it soars, and the light permits a reflection that the mirror captures, repeats, and maintains. Guacamayo, a character who is a bird, aspires to be the sun and is nicknamed Cheating Mirror's Great Spittle. His reflection is a deceit, however, and as Chinchibirín suggests, Guacamayo "¡Es el Engañador y va a perdersnos!" (Is the Cheater and will lead us to our doom! [125]). It is in this suggestion that man must not be deceived by appearances that hides perhaps the ultimate message of Asturias's legend in the form of a play. All the marvelous quality of "transparent metamorphosis" on which the surrealist universe depends can be turned into dust through lies and deceit, which shortchange truth, which is to say, beauty. The role of the artist – here as in all of Asturias's fiction – is to remove the veil from the kind of flagrant deception that is portrayed in "Cuculcán." Macaw suggests that humanity defends what it has always heard without necessarily understanding it ("La memoria de mis palabras, sin el esclarecimiento . . . es lo que defiendes por amor propio" [The recollection of my words, without enlightenment . . . is what you defend out of pride; 111]). Asturias's self-designated mission will be to bring forth *esclarecimiento* through moral examples, such as the ones portrayed in the *Leyendas*. Even when good does not triumph (as in "Cuculcán"), what concerns the artist is to provide a flash of insight, to bring with him, like the formal ending to an Upanishad, "the peace which passeth understanding." This is why, like his fictional counterpart Chinchibirín, Asturias is ready to "defend with words . . . what can be tasted with the sharp knife of sight" ("Cuculcán," iii). In this sense, "Cuculcán" may be seen as his literary statement of intention, one that very appropriately brings the 1948 edition of the *Leyendas* to a close and stands at the threshold of the *neo-Indigenista* novels of more open revolutionary intent.³⁹

2

Becoming ants after the harvest:

Hombres de maíz

Spiritual socialism is on the move. In this historic moment, all of us are turning toward every man, turning around egoistic liberalism toward the great social entity in which every man is immersed.

Juan José Arévalo, President of Guatemala (1945–1951)

Para que el grupo “indio” recupere su identidad, se despierte, se vuelva autor de su historia, se debe reanudar el hilo del tiempo en el momento en el cual fue cortado. Solamente a través de este proceso puede ponerse en marcha la historia guatemalteca como totalidad. [El problema] . . . no se va a resolver por una ilusoria “integración” o “ladinización” (todas, ideologías que justifican una supuesta superioridad), sino por una dialéctica real y objetiva que permitirá, antes que todo, al autóctono recuperar su tierra y su historia, de las cuales ha sido violentamente expropiado desde la colonia española.

C. Guzmán Böckler and J. L. Herbert,
Guatemala: una interpretación histórico-social

Volvieron, pues, a Pisigüilito. Horconear de nuevo para construir un rancho más grande, porques sus hijos casados tenían muchos hijos y todos se fueron a vivir con ellos.

Epilogue, *Hombres de maíz*

Sinbad sails home

Europe was good to Miguel Angel Asturias. The years in Paris were remarkably productive, and the contact with artists, journalists, and anthropologists a priceless apprenticeship. Well settled in the French capital but deeply attached to his homeland, he taught himself to re-create it in fiction in order to stave off the pangs of nostalgia. Eventually, like his country's Indian “daykeepers,” he became convinced not that the time of Maya

civilization had passed, to be followed by the time of European civilization, but that the two had begun to parallel one another.

The *Leyendas de Guatemala* was a first step taken to rejuvenate national culture by recognizing and integrating the wealth of its legacy.¹ The problem was that this inspiring heritage laid buried and partly forgotten many miles from the French capital. Given the obvious ascendancy of the motherland in the work of Asturias, Paul Valéry suggested to him that he needed to be near the wellspring of his inspiration.² Otherwise, he might succumb to the grip of Europeanization and lose his voice, his originality.³ In 1933, the young author heeds the French poet's advice; he returns to Guatemala and continues to write, even though Jorge Ubico, the *señor presidente* then in power, succeeds in drastically curtailing his budding career.

Ubico's dogmatism was no less entrenched than Estrada Cabrera's. One of his first resolutions after coming to power was to close down the Popular University. In 1934, he also proclaims a series of "vagrancy laws," a new method to obtain free labor for the fincas (a few years earlier he had done away with debt peonage or inherited debts, and the new laws were a measure to win back the landowner's favor). Guatemala's civil liberties collapsed once again under the pall of repression.

Asturias did what he could to stay alive with some measure of dignity during the somber years of Ubico's reign of terror (1931–1944). Upon his return from Paris, he began teaching night classes in literature at the law school. Then, in 1934, he founded a newspaper called *Exito*, which was pushed out of the market a year later by a more openly pro-government news-sheet. After *Exito* founders, the author of the *Leyendas* begins writing a column entitled "El diván de Madame" for his own ex-rival, *El Liberal Progresista*; his sympathies for the Spanish Republicans soon become transparent and end up costing him his job, however (Callan, *O.C.*, IV, liv). Never one to give up easily, Asturias decides to join forces with his friend Soler y Pérez and, in June 1938, they found the country's first radio news program, *Diario del Aire*. At the time, all international news was dictated by the presidential palace and "had to be read exactly as they had been dictated" (López Alvarez, 91). Asturias is careful not to incur the tyrant's wrath; the *Diario del Aire* never

editorializes and couches official dispatches with music and poetic maxims. Its popularity soon spreads across the nation (Pilón, 40).

Unfortunately, the silenced author soon discovers that minding his own business is not enough to stave off Ubico's vampirism. In 1942, he is appointed to serve in the National Congress as part of a crafty government program that Marta Pilón describes in her fact-filled biography: "It was useful for Ubico to have people of social and intellectual standing in the National Assembly so that it could be recorded in history that they were the ones granting him more time in power. These chosen people could only refuse such signal honor with difficulty and at risk to their lives"(49). Asturias is forced to join the National Assembly, and when Ubico is deposed in June 1944, the author remains connected with his successor, General Federico Ponce Vaidez.

In October of that same year, a popular insurrection known as la Revolución de Octubre ousts the government junta headed by Ponce Vaidez. Fervent supporters of Asturias (and notably his French admirers) have always maintained that he took an active role in this liberation movement. The truth is as different as chalk from cheese. Not only did he not take part in any antigovernment activities at this time, he was blatantly "tagged as a collaborator of Ubico's and of the Junta that came after him by his own ex-friends and colleagues" and was forced to go into exile in Mexico in 1945 (Martin, *O.C.*, IV, lv).

The effect of Ubico's reign of power on Asturias's personal life cannot be underestimated. By the time he returns to his homeland in 1933, the author has fully sketched Cara de Angel's tragedy in *El señor presidente* and is well aware of the dire consequences of opposing a tyrant. Already outspoken against despotism and brute force as a student and member of *Prensa Latina*, Asturias opts for reserve and discretion after his return home. Curtailing his own freedom of expression translates itself as silence in all creative enterprises. In fact, the dearth of his production during the decade between his return to Guatemala and the publication of *E! señor presidente* is mind-boggling. (The lack of published materials in contrast with his Paris output was frequently mentioned in the local press of his

home country; for instance, in October 1942, on the occasion of his birthday, *El Imparcial* published the following note in its *página social*: “It used to be said that this kid knew how to write after returning from Europe but it seems that he knows nothing at all.” And Gerald Martin unearthed a second undated clipping that adds coals to the fire with the taunt, “let’s hope that one of these days he will decide to come out of the shell of silence in which he seems to have shut himself since his return to Guatemala. Let us see if it’s true or not that the young man knows how to write” (quoted in *O.C.*, IV, lvi, note 12).

All Asturias has to show for the thirteen years that follow his return home are a handful of poems that include *Sonetos* (1936), *Con el rehén en los dientes* (1942), *Anoche, 10 de marzo de 1543* (1943), and two “phantomimes” – *Emulo Lipolidón* (1935) and *Alclasán* (1940).⁴ He also contributes articles to *El Imparcial*, *Repertorio Americano* (San José, Costa Rica), *Letras de México*, and *El Universal Ilustrado* (Mexico), but in truth he writes nothing of great significance during this period. *El señor presidente*, practically completed since 1933, sits unpublished for thirteen years; clearly, its depiction of totalitarianism is too close a portrayal of Ubico’s own government for the book to appear with impunity.

Guilt, remorse, and disappointment add a new layer to Proteus’s ever-evolving profile; the sparkle and optimism of the Paris years are dimmed almost to the point of disappearing. His marriage to Clemencia Amado, the attractive young widow he had met soon after his return to Guatemala, begins to fall to pieces and finally dissolves between 1946 and 1947; like his father before him, Asturias turns to alcohol to drown the irritation of his own failed promise. In Paris he had found a vocation and sketched out a liberal political stance for himself; he had come home only to bury that promise.

Be that as it may, in the light of his unrelenting idealism and fight for human rights in later years, it is naive of critics and unjust of friends and enemies alike to condemn him for keeping silent or for his allowing the *Diario del Aire* to broadcast “the official history” during the nefarious decade of Ubico’s dictatorship – especially as everyone knows that Guatemala was constantly policed by the watchful eye of the tyrant and disobedience was always punished with death. Asturias didn’t sell his

ideals. He kept quiet, which is different even if censurable in the eyes of many. More tolerant and understanding than most, Juan José Arévalo, who succeeded Ponce Vaidez as president of the republic, certainly understood it that way, which is why he recalled the silenced author from exile and appointed him to diplomatic posts, first in Mexico and then in Buenos Aires.

Arévalo was a forward-minded schoolteacher who described himself as a "spiritual socialist" and was to win the presidency of Guatemala by an overwhelming majority in what has been termed the freest election the country has ever seen. He was both loved and hated by his people, however. The intellectuals and university students who convinced him to return from his self-imposed exile in Argentina gave him their wholehearted support, but he was bitterly criticized by the landed gentry and the corrupt oligarchy. He was an idealist and a believer in the federation of Central American states. Like Asturias, he sided with the common man and was ready to fight for equality and justice in a quasi-feudal country where these very concepts had been trampled underfoot. It wasn't long after he came to power that the opposition branded him a communist. On May 1, 1946, he responded:

You already know that for those politicians of the traditional line, that is to say, the dictatorial line, the President of Guatemala is Communist because he loves his people, because he is on the side of the humble people, because he aids the workers, because he refuses to be an accomplice in the bastard interests of the powerful, because he refuses to make pacts with the perpetual corruptors of people in public life.

(Quoted in Alvarez Elizandro, *Retorno a Bolívar*, 219)

These words were to signal a new beginning for the men of maize; the time of reckoning, or so they thought, had come at last. The new president lost no time in translating words into action. During his term in office the National Congress approved the Law of Supplementary Title, the Law of Forced Rental, and a colonization program in the province of Petén. The congress also decreed the establishment of the first institute of social security and of the Institute for the Development of Production, both seminal in upgrading the conditions of agricultural workers. In addition, collective farms were started at La Blanca in San Marcos and Montúfar in Jutiapa and forty-one cooperatives, including savings and loan credit unions,

were created throughout the country under the auspices of the Department of Cooperative Development, appointed on August 1, 1945. These programs to redistribute land and help the peasants finance the purchase of seed and agricultural implements were Arévalo's greatest contributions to the social and agricultural development he advocated throughout his mandate and they prepared the ground for the agrarian reform laws enacted by his successor, Jacobo Arbenz.

Like President Arévalo on the public sector, Asturias had always denounced the exploitation of the land and the plight of the Indian in his writings. When the time came to piece together the bits and pieces of his novel in progress, he decided that *Hombres de maíz* (1949) would be as revolutionary in form and content as the new government policies were evolutionary in outlook.⁵ The young author had already integrated Mesoamerican myth and folktales into the *Leyendas de Guatemala*. In *La arquitectura de la vida nueva* (1928) he had proselytized in favor of the social and ethical transformation that could put his country on the map of progress. In addition, he had denounced injustice and the horrors of dictatorship in his first novel. In this new one he would hark back to his first writings on the Indian and actualize a subject that he could now clothe with twenty years of practical experience and a solid background in Mayan culture.

A unifying principle

Hombres de maíz does not spring into being fully formed, however. As Gerald Martin points out, the novel "was being fashioned as a collection of heterogeneous fragments since Asturias's days in Paris" (*O.C.*, IV, lxxv). Its source of inspiration is doubtlessly an article about the Indian cacique Gaspar Hijom published in *El Imparcial* on January 4, 1927. In flowery language, this anonymous chronicle describes the ambitious settlers who dare the wrath of an Indian chief and end up ridding themselves of him with poison. This bit of sensationalism seems to have catapulted Asturias from the incipient *costumbrismo* of his first two stories with Indian themes – "El Lucas" and "La venganza del indio" – to the sophisticated and polyphonic *neo-Indigenismo* that culminates in *Hombres de maíz*.⁶ Clearly, the cat-

alysts responsible for the transition were the courses on Mayan culture and the reflection on identity generated by *Prensa Latina*; the social dilemma portrayed in “Gaspar Hijom” is simply the spark that inspires Asturias to compose an American idiom all his own.

If “El Lucas” and “La venganza del indio” do not directly prefigure the characters and events portrayed in Asturias’s most complex and sophisticated novel, by the 1930s easily recognizable fragments of *Hombres de maíz* begin to appear in newspapers and magazines. An early version of the sixth chapter, “En la tiniebla del cañaveral,” is published in *El Imparcial* on August 15, 1931, and an undated story of this same period, “Luis Garrafita,” prefigures in many ways the justly famous first chapter, “Gaspar Ilóm.”⁷ According to Georges Pillement, the germ of part VI, “Correo-Coyote” (he translates the story in Paris as “Le sorcier aux mains noires”), is likewise written during this same fertile period, a fact that permits us to ascertain that parts I, III, and VI of the novel existed wholly or in part by 1935, which is to say, fourteen years before Losada publishes *Hombres de maíz* in Buenos Aires. In addition, we know from Martin that part II, “Machojón,” was published by *Sur* (no. 181) in 1949, suggesting that it had just been finished, as can be demonstrably adduced given its stylistic similarities with part IV, “Colonel Chalo Godoy,” which Blanca Asturias maintains was written in her house in 1948.⁸

In all evidence then, Asturias’s first *neo-Indigenista* novel grows piecemeal and goes through many facets, more akin in its conception and realization to a work of architecture than to the typically mimetic novel with its diachronic development and set of interrelated characters. This begins to explain the structural unorthodoxy that has inspired widespread critical disapproval and prompted many readers to imagine a lack of unity in the text.⁹ But it is by no means the only reason why Asturias’s masterpiece is misunderstood.

Hombres de maíz is divided into six seemingly autonomous sections, each with a different protagonist. In addition, the plot does not develop “ethically” – through its characters – or chronologically, and three of its protagonists operate on at least two consecutive levels at all times: After their death or disappearance as living beings in the action, they are reintroduced as

legendary figures from an arcane past. For these reasons it is impossible, as Giuseppe Bellini noted, to judge "*Hombres de maíz según los esquemas tradicionales de la novela*" (*Narrativa*, 69). How curious, then, that even while recognizing and applauding Asturias's will to innovate, critics disparage his second novel exactly because it strays from the norm. The conception and execution of *Hombres* are so unprecedented that its most revolutionary feature – its principle of narrative development – continues to await recognition and, uncharted, restrains the approach to one of the most skillful novels in Latin America.

The reader of *Hombres* is immediately struck by the lack of character continuity, by the obscure and purposefully confusing sense of time, and by the recurrent conjunction of three structural motifs – fire, water, and corn – which weave their way throughout the novel. Naturally, in and of themselves, these narrative elements would fall short of being an original device. But Asturias conceived his 1949 novel as a palimpsest of myths set forth in the *Popol Vuh* and thus provided his reader with the blueprint to understand his structural building units. In addition, this well-knit congress of texts across time and of structural motifs across the pages of his manuscript endows the novel with the spatial equivalent of a diachronic and synchronic dimension, a narrative depth and breadth that it would otherwise lack as he chose to set no store by chronology. His aim in this instance was to actualize the earthbound traditions of the past in the commercially minded and rootless present in order to portray a hopeful message of renewal.

The motif of dialogue and response between past and present, tradition and progress, Indian and *ladino*, and the resulting transfiguration depicted in the epilogue dictated of itself the triadic structure the novel would have. Asturias brought together the mythic Gaspar and the persevering Goyo through the intercession of a well-meaning postman, and conceived the thematic structure as two propositions and a resolution: exploitation of the soil/retribution (the subject of chaps. I–IX); the hero's quest (chaps. X–XIX); and finally, the return to the land (epilogue). The one exception in the rule of threes is the fundamental conflict that sets the Guatemalan Indian in opposition to the mercantile corn growers, a theme that flows univocally throughout.

The opposition between corn growers and men of maize is not only commercial but ethical and moral as well. Maize is both divine (the god Hunahpu is maize incarnate) and fundamentally human, as, according to the *Popol Vuh*, “the making, the modeling of our first mother-father [was done] with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh, food alone for the human legs and arms, for our first fathers, the four human works” (Tedlock, 164). Since the time of the Conquest, the men of maize have had to abide by their own dogma, “maize is sacred,” and contend with the rule imposed by the conquerors, “maize is profit.” This dialectic is tantamount to an opposition between natural and unnatural or, more exactly, between faith and blasphemy, and it has no resolution other than the armed struggle described in the first four tales.

In the first of these, an Indian rebel named Gaspar Ilóm attacks the speculators who are burning vast stretches of forest to plant corn as a commercial investment. For a short time he succeeds in pushing back the men who “hack away the eyelids of the land of Ilóm with axes” (1), but then, surprisingly, he puts an end to his own life.¹⁰ His sacrifice and apparent defeat are totally perplexing until we compare his behavior with that of Hunahpu, the Mayan deity who served as his prototype in Asturias’s master plan. In the *Popol Vuh*, Hunahpu is apparently defeated when he visits the underworld kingdom with his twin Xbalanque. Both brothers are sacrificed by the Lords of Xibalba who burn their bones and cast them into the river. However, the bones “didn’t go far – they just sank to the bottom of the water. They became handsome boys; they looked just the same as before when they reappeared (*Popol Vuh*, 149). In this new guise the twins return to outwit and finally destroy the lords of the underworld who are named Camé, which means “Death” in Quiché.

In *Hombres de maíz*, Gaspar is poisoned by Manuela Machojón, the wife of an Indian turncoat in the service of Colonel Godoy. In a manner that readily recalls Hunahpu’s sacrifice, the cacique of Ilóm jumps into the river to “douse the fire in his intestines” (79) and appears the next day after having “cast off his death” (20). In the meantime, his men have been taken by surprise and massacred by the soldiers; Gaspar jumps into the river once again so that “the water which gave him life against

the poison would give him death against the troops" (21). It quickly becomes apparent that, far from ringing with finality, the death of this character is a necessary step in the evolutionary process. Gaspar as a living character disappears from the novel, but he remains present as a theomorphic hero in the five subsequent sections; as Hunahpu in the Maya-Quiché epic, he simply emerges from the water in a different guise. Furthermore, by means of this transformation into a legendary figure, this character transcends the limited effectiveness of his revolutionary action in the first two chapters. Cast as the fountainhead of Quiché law and as the defender of the sacred bond between man and maize, Gaspar functions as the signifier of revolt for the characters in the novel who seek and obtain revenge thereafter.

If we consider Gaspar and all that he represents as the novel's thesis, we must consider the troops and the corn growers who attack him as the forces of antithesis. Structurally speaking, the first four tales of *Hombres de maíz* (chaps. I–IX) develop as mirror images of each other: The thematic associations in the first two chapters (namely, the nexus between the corn growers and victory and between the Indians and defeat) are simply inverted in the seven that follow.

In the first tale, the yellow-eared rabbit sorcerers who protect the Indian community put a curse on the criminals: All those who participated in the Ilóm massacre are made sterile and condemned to die by fire before the seventh year is up. In addition, all of the men who take part in the crime of Ilóm are punished in order. The most immediate criminals, the Machojón who coaxed Gaspar into drinking the poison, die in the blazing cornfields "in the midst of a sea of fire" (48) after mysteriously losing their son in a cloud of fireflies ("Machojón eyed the flying storm of sparks. . . . The horse, the packsaddle, the sheep-skin cover, the bags he was using to carry his gifts to Candelaria Reinoso, everything was on fire" [29]). Finally, in the fourth tale (chaps. VIII and IX), the soldiers who massacred Gaspar's men are mysteriously consumed by "flames like lashing reins" and "flames in the form of bloodstained hands" (100).

But if fire rages outside for the enemies of Ilóm, it certainly dies within. In keeping with the mirror opposites that structure

the narrative development, it follows that if the flames of retribution are kindled to burn corn, the flames of procreation should be extinguished to punish men for their treason: "In them and in their children and all their descendants the light of the tribes was extinguished, light of the children . . . in the loins of men who were as evil as the dry stony places that blaze with cold in winter" (304). In one respect, the purview of both Indians and *ladinos* is one and the same: the end of race is anathema. But all seem blind to the fact that those who destroy maize destroy life and thus themselves. The soldiers of Godoy's army curse their sterility: "The daylight that morning broke the light of life in our bodies, it was light salted with sorcerer's curses, and those who had children saw them die, and their grandchildren too . . . and those of us without children, our spring ran dry" (252).

The Machojones will have no descendants, and in the third tale (chaps. VI–VIII) the Tecún brothers behead the eight members of the Zacatón family who provided the poison given to Gaspar.¹¹ The blind man Goyo Yic cries out to María begging for the return of their children, and Nicho Aquino fears that his runaway wife may have taken "the blood of my child (which) she carries in her belly" (199–200). They fear the loss of their offspring and yet passively condone or actively abuse their own descent: "maize, which is the flesh of our flesh on the cobs, which are like our children" (204). All have forgotten tradition and become blind to self-destruction; the end of maize signals the end of man: "Everything will end up impoverished and scorched by the sun, by the air, by the clearing fires, if we keep sowing maize to make a business of it, as though it weren't sacred, highly sacred" (204).

Asturias draws upon this analogy between man and maize to orchestrate his narrative development along two distinct, albeit closely related, avenues of meaning. Characters in his novel behave in groups as allegorical clusters representing good and evil, traitors and heroes, struggling for or against a very basic ideology. They are affiliated with each other, not simply through a shared history, as in traditional fiction, but through semantic networks that neatly set them apart in two groups: those who defile the land and those who respect it. As we can see in Table 2.1, the former are all associated with fire and

Table 2.1. *The role of fire and water in Hombres de maíz*

<i>Indians (water)</i>	
1a. Gaspar Ilóm	“swallowed like a small fish” (3) “rainwater eyes” (6) “dripping liquid maize-ears of rainwater” (20)
b. María the Rain	“takes flight like cascading water” (327) “María the Rain is the Rain!” (327)
2a. Goyo Yic	lives among “fish men” (308)
b. María Tecún	hides “the soul of María the Rain” (327)
3a. Nicho Aquino	“a circle of deep water coiled in my waist” (305) “four paws of running rain” (297) “blazing eyes of liquid fire . . . (297)
b. Isabra Terrón	“went out for water and fell down a water hole” (305)
<i>Ladinos (fire)</i>	
4a. Machojón	burns “in the midst of a sea of fire” (48)
b. Vaca Manuela	burns “in the midst of a sea of fire” (48)
5a. Machojón Jr.	smothered by fireflies “blinded by a lash of white fire” (29)
b. Candelaria	name derives from Latin <i>candela</i> “dressed almost always in yellow” (258) “eyes fixed on the heart of a furnace full of burning wood” (260)
6a. Colonel Godoy and troops	consumed by “flames like lashing reins” (100) and “flames in the form of bloodstained hands” (100)

sterility while the latter (all of whom are Indian) are coupled with water and, in the case of Goyo Yic (who returns to Pisigüilito to harvest corn), with fecundity.

In the first tale of *Hombres de maíz*, Gaspar is “swallowed by a toothless half moon . . . like a small fish” (3),¹² and later in the action he overcomes the poison received from Vaca Manuela’s hands by drinking the river: “Gaspar Ilóm appeared at dawn after drinking down the river to extinguish the thirst of the poison in his intestines. He washed out his entrails, washed his blood, cast off his death” (20). In addition, Gaspar’s wife is María the Rain, “she who took flight like cascading water” (327), and is portrayed as the moon in the last chapter of the novel: “María the Rain . . . was paralyzed there where she is, between the sky, the earth, and the void!” (327).¹³ This association between Gaspar’s wife and the moon may seem idle until

we recall a nexus rooted in tradition. According to central Mexican belief, “the moon goddess resided in Tlalocán, abode of the rain gods, and in mainland Mexican art the moon symbol frequently serves as a container for water” (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 245).¹⁴ As if traditional beliefs did not provide, in and of themselves, sufficient evidence for the link among Gaspar, María, and water, in chap. XIX the wizard explains to Nicho Aquino that María Tecún (the blind man’s runaway wife in chap. X of the novel) is really María the Rain, who will “rise on high in the time that is to come” (327).

As this chapter begins, the estranged husband, Goyo Yic, is calling his wife, and his lament is graphically spelled out: “María TecúúUUUn!” (103). Repetition and onomatopoeia are sometimes gratuitous in Asturias’s writings, but in this instance they are particularly relevant to the thematic development, for in lowland and Chiapan languages “U” is one of the names for the moon (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 241). We know, moreover, that the moon goddess is widely held to be the sun’s wife in Mayaland, a fact that further confirms the relationship among Gaspar, Goyo, and Hunahpu. If María Tecún is likened to María the Rain and both are associated with the moon goddess, then Gaspar, married to the latter, would be the incarnation of the sun god in the novel.

Five features shared by both mythic heroes confirm this hypothesis: First, they are both decapitated in what amounts to be a deceptive defeat for, as I have noted, death within the sphere of action of the men of maize is a generative feature just like it is in the Maya-Quiché epic.¹⁵ Second, both heroes are compared to fish, and both emerge from the water to vanquish the dominion of evil (represented by Xibalba in the *Popol Vuh* and by the corn growers in *Hombres*).¹⁶ Third, both come in contact with fire and water in a symbolic synthesis that evokes the germination of the sacred grain; and fourth, both engender corn. Last but not least, Hunahpu and Gaspar have a double nexus with maize. As the sun, Hunahpu predetermines the growth of the grain while simultaneously, in his agrarian incarnation, he is the very embodiment of the sprouting kernel. In other words, maize, his gift to humanity, is the very substance he is composed of even before it becomes the constitutive matter of Mesoamerican man according to Mayan belief. In the same

CREATION--> (Success) of the earth	CREATION--> (Failure) animals	CREATION--> (Failure) men of mud	CREATION (Failure) men of wood	CREATION (Success) men of maize
Tale of heroes and villains: narrative "interruption"				

Figure 2.1. Narrative "interruption" in the *Popol Vuh*

manner, Gaspar is likened to the sun as the husband of María the Rain and described as he who brings corn into the world: "the son of Gaspar Ilóm . . . [is] the maize, the maize of Ilóm" (327).

Burning water

The analogy between the corn god in the *Popol Vuh* and the defender and begetter of maize in Asturias's novel compels the reader to turn to the Quiché manuscript for further clarification. In the *Popol Vuh* the gods fail in their first three attempts to transform the preconceived idea they have of "man" into a living reality. "What they want is beings who will walk, work and talk in an articulate and measured way . . . creatures who will give offerings and call upon their makers by name. What they get instead, on the first try, is beings who have no arms to work with and can only squawk, chatter, and howl, and whose descendants are the animals of today. On the second try, they make a being out of mud that is unable to walk or turn its head or even keep its shape"; completely dissatisfied, the gods end up destroying their creation (Tedlock, 34). Soon after, they try again; this time they use wood but, once again, it is to no avail; they must destroy the clumsy beings they have created.

What is most pertinent to the reader of *Hombres de maíz* is that before proceeding to the account of the successful creation in which corn is used, the outcome of the Maya genesis is temporarily suspended in a manner that can be schematically represented as in Figure 2.1. The manuscript seems to change course at this point and introduces both the heroes and villains of the Maya-Quiché people before concluding the mystery of creation.

In all appearances, therefore, the *Popol Vuh* "lacks unity" just as much as Asturias's novel. Otherwise, why would it begin tell-

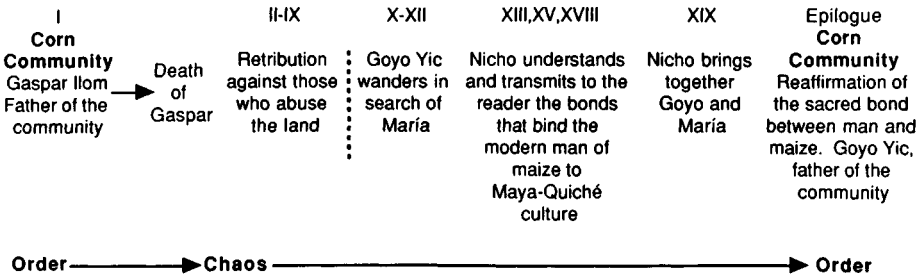


Figure 2.2. Diachronic development in *Hombres de maíz*

ing seemingly unrelated stories (namely, those of the cultural heroes Hunahpu and Xbalanque) before concluding the creation myth? Haven't we here another instance of, to borrow Seymour Menton's expression, "loose ends," bits and pieces of stories that are "artificially tied together" (Menton, *Historia crítica*, 221–222)?

We have seen in our discussion of the *Leyendas de Guatemala* that Asturias meant to actualize the Mayan legacy by introducing mythological concepts as well as rhetorical devices borrowed from the Quiché literature with which he was amply familiar. Clearly, the structural devices that give internal cohesion to this literature are not the same that we find in the bourgeois novel. As Menton rightly points out, "Asturias aims to break away from the traditional concept of the novel"; however, I totally disagree with this critic's ulterior pronouncements about the 1949 saga: "There are no protagonists in the entire novel" argues Menton, "No conflicts to be solved. There is no narrative development. . . . *Hombres de maíz* is inferior to *El señor presidente* because of the artificial method used to tie loose ends together" (*Historia crítica*, 221–222).

Clearly, there are protagonists in *Hombres*, but instead of having the action of the novel revolve around one central character, Asturias anchors it on three who substitute for one another: Gaspar Ilóm, Goyo Yic, and Nicho Aquino. His novel must be seen as a rite of passage during which the blind Goyo (blind in both senses of the word – he is both physically impaired and unable to see the sacred bond that binds him to the land) obtains experience after undergoing a series of trials similar to those of Hunahpu and Xbalanque in the *Popol Vuh*. As we can see in Figure 2.2, it is only after acquiring this experience (and

giving the reader an opportunity to learn from it) that Goyo can find his estranged wife and children and return to Pisigüilito to harvest corn.

The novel's first hero, Gaspar Ilóm, dies just like the twins' father and uncle One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu ("And then they were sacrificed and buried. . . . The head of One Hunahpu was cut off" [*Popol Vuh*, part III, 113]). But death, as we have pointed out, has no finality in a mythic context where heroes function as behavioral models. Gaspar is the living emblem of a revolt that aims to preserve the traditional nexus between the Indians, the land, and the maize from which they are made, and Goyo becomes the beneficiary of his sacrifice once the portent of this cultural legacy is explained to the reader via Nicho the messenger. In *Hombres de maíz*, therefore, characters substitute for one another in a logical chain that aims to instruct and not merely to entertain.

As was the case for the *Leyendas*, Asturias's generic prototype for his first *neo-Indigenista* novel is the fable; this explains why the objective of the many tales told or acted out by his characters is to enforce a useful truth. Menton is simply mistaken when he argues that there is no narrative development in this novel. Actually, the action evolves from blindness to understanding of the most sacred tenet of Maya-Quiché thought: Human beings and maize are inextricably bound. Never one to lose sight of political goals, Asturias's portrayal is a translation of what President Arévalo and his successor Jacobo Arbenz advocate through legal means: the distribution of land to the peasants and the formation of small privately owned farms.

Just as innovative as Asturias's character-substitution principle is his displacement of emphasis from the actors in the action to the recipient. Characters in *Hombres* are comparable to actors in a morality play (which is in many ways what the *Popol Vuh* is); that is to say, their role is to educate the reader either through exempla or through explanations like the one the old man with black hands gives Nicho Aquino in chap. XVIII.

This recipient-oriented fiction contrasts with the character-focused bourgeois novel in which the author emphasizes at all costs the importance of the protagonists, and, consequently, their adventures are perceived as something extraneous to the reader. In contrast, what happens to the characters of Asturias's

fiction is not an end in itself but meant to dramatize a message designed for and addressed to the reader. This is not the same as saying that "there are no protagonists in the entire novel"; the protagonists are present, only they play a role that is totally different from the one they occupy in traditional Western fiction. In addition, because the narrative development is not tied to the life of one character and because myth and not history serves as the structural substratum for the novel, the chronological development of *Hombres* is not linear and readers may have the impression that the action does not move forward. We need to ask ourselves, therefore, what holds Asturias's novel together and, second, what means he relies on in order to arrive at a resolution.

The clue to the cohesion of *Hombres de maíz* is sign association or, in other terms, the linking of elements. Once again, because his aim was to integrate the traditions of the past, Asturias turns to the *Popol Vuh* as a structural model and orchestrates his novel as a series of variations on the theme of fire and water. In the Maya-Quiché manuscript, water is used to dissolve the mud creatures while fire destroys the men of wood (their own cooking utensils tell them: "We shall burn you" [85]). Fire also destroys Earthquake-Cabrakan,¹⁷ one of the twins' enemies, and it deceives the Lords of Xibalba who are tricked into thinking that macaw feathers and fireflies are really red hot embers on the tips of their pine torches (*Popol Vuh*, 137). Fire even destroys the twins' father and uncle, making it possible for the cultural heroes to come into their own as emblems of the Fourth Age, summit of Maya-Quiché civilization.¹⁸ Furthermore, this last transformation does not take place until their own bodies have been burned and their ashes cast into the river (149).

As we can see in Figure 2.3, death and destruction are associated with both fire and water in the Maya epic; however, the end of stirps, which results at each level, must be regarded as a necessary evolutionary step if we take into account the long-range narrative intention of the text, that is to say, the creation of the men of maize. In other words, the actual destruction of the men of mud and of the wooden figures, imperfect creatures both, brings the tale gradually closer to the final and lasting creation in which corn is used.

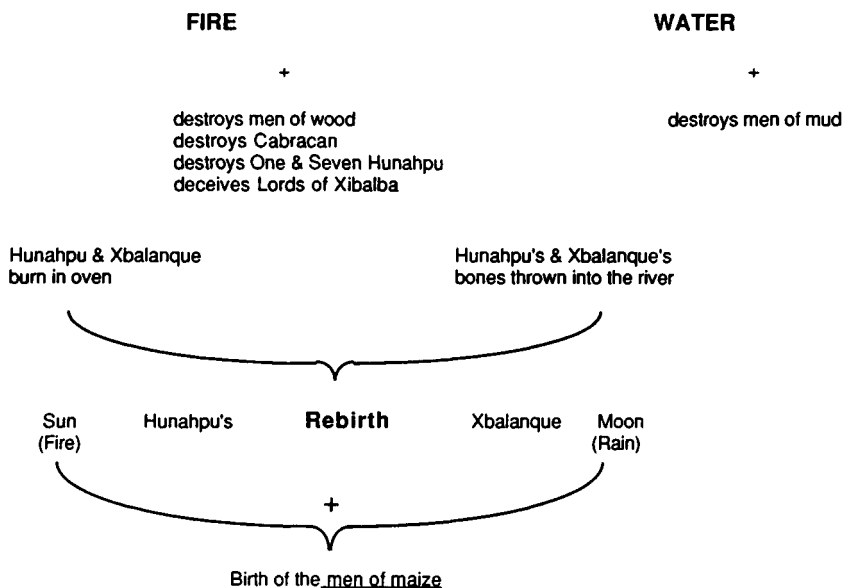


Figure 2.3. The role of fire and water in the *Popol Vuh*

In sum, then, the episodic, isolated portrayals connoting the hero's destruction in the Chichicastenango manuscript reverse their sense when viewed chronologically. For instance, Hunahpu and Xbalanque are first burned or, in other words, deceptively "vanquished" by fire. Their bones are subsequently thrown into the river. The conjunction of the two seemingly destructive elements, fire and water, produces a creation that is fully in keeping with the growth motif issuing from a synthesis of opposites.

Furthermore, after the twins' regeneration and their victory over the Lords of Xibalba, "they ascended straight on into the sky, and the sun belongs to one and the moon to the other" (*Popol Vuh*, 159–160). This last transformation is yet another step in the synthesizing model of the Mayan genesis, as the twins' underground journey is clearly analogous to that of the maize plant and maize needs the action of sun and rain in order to grow.

The decapitation of Hunahpu in Bat House clearly symbolizes the sprouting kernel, which loses its head to allow new life to issue forth from its body. Fire and water (the burning oven

and the river in Xibalba) or, later in the text, sun and moon (coupled with rain) work together before the sprouted kernel can pierce through the ground and complete the generative cycle.

Only when corn comes into existence is the tale of creation taken up again in the *Popol Vuh* (part IV, 1). In other words, the Quiché forefathers cannot be molded until their blood and essence, the corn that constitutes “the ingredients for the flesh of the human work, the human design” comes into being (163). Corn, unconceived at the time of the failed creations (animals, mud, and wood), is predetermined by the twins whose tale evokes the birth of the sacred grain. In fact, the twins’ gift to humanity, maize, is their very substance as well as the constitutive matter of the first beings, according to Mayan belief. The cultural heroes bridge in the very flesh they share with their spiritual offspring the gap between the human and the divine. Corn, Hunahpu incarnate, is also the seedbed of the Quiché people.¹⁹

The same can be said of Gaspar Ilóm, begetter and giver of corn in Asturias’s novel. The question is, Why, fundamental as he is to the essence of *Hombres de maíz*, does he fade from its pages while another character, Goyo Yic, is cast as the cynosure of the novel? We know from Freud that sacrifice and, more specifically, murder of the father is the basis of all rebirth rituals signaling the inception of the symbolic order (*Totem and Taboo*, 232, 242, 246). This is certainly the tenor of One Hunahpu’s and Seven Hunahpu’s deaths in the *Popol Vuh*, as well as of Gaspar’s immolation in Asturias’s novel. What remains puzzling to many readers is the sort of symbolic order that a healed blind man and his overburdened and child-ridden wife can well represent. In fact, the relationship between Gaspar Ilóm and Goyo the blind man has eluded readers of *Hombres* since its publication. Giuseppe Bellini, for one, has noted that “the fifth episode, entitled María Tecún, has weak connections with the main plot of the book,” and most critics berating the novel for its purported lack of unity point specifically to the “weak link” between the first ten chapters (murder of Ilóm/retribution by fire) and the next nine, in which the tales of Goyo Yic and the mailman Nicho Aquino are interwoven (Bellini, *Narrativa*, 67).

Opossum's dawn

As chap. X of *Hombres de maíz* begins, Goyo Yic has been abandoned by his wife, María Tecún, who leaves with their children. He seeks help from the sorcerer Chigüichón Culebro, who restores his eyesight after a painful operation. Desperate to find his family, Goyo becomes a peddler in the hope of recognizing María's voice. One night after being unfaithful to her, he returns to his tent only to discover the flight of his pet opossum. While Goyo scours the countryside in the hope of finding María, his identification with this animal is such that whenever he contemplates his shadow at the light of the moon, "it was like seeing the shadow of a she-opossum. The moonlight turned him from a man into an animal, an opossum, a female opossum, with a pouch in front of him to carry the babies in" (130). Asturias takes the identification one step farther: When the opossum escapes, Goyo runs away into the jungle and lives like an animal.²⁰

The dual nature of Goyo-Opossum is an example of *nahualismo*, a notion central to the thematic development of Asturias's novel. According to this popular Mesoamerican belief, all men, plants, and animals have a spiritual essence from birth. In *Hombres de maíz* this spiritual essence always takes the form of an animal, and all Indian characters in the novel are linked with one. In Mesoamerican mythology, the opossum is traditionally referred to as a god of dawn and harbinger of light and it is portrayed as the civilizing model representative of the Mayan Fourth Age (Raphaël Girard, 258). Moreover, as Claude Lévi-Strauss indicates, in the South American mythic tradition the mission of this animal is to introduce cultivated plants (*Le Cru et le cuit*, 190). Thus, Goyo, the corn farmer in the epilogue, behaves exactly in accordance with his *nahual's* sphere of action by harvesting the sacred grain. There is one momentous difference between one and the other, however. The opossum's mythic behavior is allegorically immutable. Goyo, on the other hand, is a man who evolves, a blind man with a sense of vision.

In the last chapter, when he finally finds María Tecún, their reunion takes place on terms significantly different from those that existed during the couple's years together. First and foremost, he is no longer blind and the experience he has acquired

while searching for his wife must clearly be read as a rite of passage. As María Tecún's husband, Goyo was maimed, unproductive, and fully dependent. Abandoned by her, he recovers his eyesight and asserts his autonomy. In addition, of the four couples who separate in the novel, only Goyo and María are reunited and return to Pisigüilito, where the action started, to harvest corn: "Old folk, young folk, men and women, they all became ants after the harvest to carry home the maize: ants, ants, ants, ants" (329). And the ant, along with the opossum and the coyote, is one of the animals responsible for the discovery of corn, according to the Mesoamerican mythic tradition.²¹ This tradition, conveniently cast in the same mold as the most basic structure of Asturias's novel (or, rather, vice versa)²² would explain the appearance of Nicho Aquino, the coyote-postman in chap. XIII. This character completes the triangle of forces twice preempted by Goyo as both opossum and ant.

Symbolic quarters within this mythic pyramid are not all they share, moreover. Emblematic of behavior patterns, the main characters of *Hombres de maíz* are systematically portrayed as analogous to each other. Gaspar, Goyo, and Nicho, on one hand, and María the Rain, María Tecún, and Isabra, on the other, are both individualized while, at the same time, cast as correlative elements within the narrative development. Gaspar defends, Nicho understands, Goyo carries out the collective urge of his people: returning to harvest the land. They are one will dramatized through three men, and Asturias makes this obvious through comparison. Nicho, like Gaspar is "poisoned" (with the brew he is given in Aleja Cuevas's bar).²³ Like Goyo, he sits under an amate, "the tree whose flower is hidden in its fruit, the flower only blind men see, the woman only lovers see" (205). Goyo's hidden flower is María; Nicho's is Isabra. Both women are missing, both are "tecunas," unseen as the land of Ilóm is unheeded by Gaspar. Goyo is blind and Nicho unable to see the tragedy of his life at the service of others. But both set off on a quest that leads to revelations and, ultimately, to the establishment of a new order patterned after the patriarchal agricultural model of the Mayan Fourth Age. To achieve this order Goyo must first find María, and Nicho, albeit unknowingly, comes to his rescue. Not before his two functions in the novel have been fulfilled, however. First and foremost, he will

be the recipient of the ancestral mysteries that shed light on the sacred nexus between man and maize. Second, and just as important, he will bring together Goyo and his estranged wife.

Wiser and a couple once again, the Yics return to the rectified Arcadia where the action started and Asturias's narrative comes full circle. Starting in the first tale with the destruction of corn, the novel is brought to fruition with the germination and harvesting of the grain. For this reason, instead of agreeing with Fernando Alegría, who perceives a lack of optimism in what he describes as Asturias's "social realism" (in *Literatura y revolución*, 76), I feel that *Hombres* offers an encouraging social model and emphatically postulates a revolutionary course of action that brings the men of maize from chaos to stability by pointing out the intrinsic relationship that exists between human beings and the land.²⁴

The thematic climate of the novel evolves from upheaval to order, from sacrifice to production, from barrenness to fertility. Asturias extols both the virtues and hardships inherent within a learning process and his novel as coded message instructs man's return to the ancient and genuine involvement with his cultural past as the one means of avoiding the chaos imposed by foreign exploiters. When Goyo Yic goes back to harvest corn, he is – like the ants in Mayan mythology – duplicating the social model outlined by the gods. The cultivation of life's own substance is further integration into the evolutionary cycle: Corn is procreative, for man is made of corn dough and feeds on his own vital substance. Gaspar is linked to the god Hunahpu; he is corn, and the Indian, symbolic beneficiary of his sacrifice, the "man of maize."

The novel concludes with the apotheosis of the grain that to the Mayan peasant is emblematic of both traditional order and communal sense. Asturias recasts the ancient manuscript of his ancestors while faithfully adhering to the signs of the times. In 1947–1948, when he starts piecing together all the elements of his fanfare for the common man, it was common knowledge that his country's land was in the hands of very few men and that most of it was allowed to lie fallow. As President Arévalo's census of 1950 would later reveal, 1,719,740 acres were the property of 54 fincas and, of these, 1,575,181 were not cultivated (Monteforte Toledo, *Guatemala*, 412). In *Hombres de maíz*,

Asturias's prescribed solution to the problem of the Guatemalan latifundio prefigures by two years the projected law presented by Víctor Manuel Gutiérrez and I. Humberto Ortiz of the Agricultural Commission appointed by Arévalo's congress. These men, like the author himself, firmly believed that the answer to their country's land riddle was to favor "the formation of capitalist small farmers with productive farms" (*Estrella de Centroamérica*, 171). Goyo Yic, the farmer portrayed in the epilogue of *Hombres de maíz* is one such model. His return to Pisigüilito with the numerous members of an extended family ("their married children had many children and they all went to live with them" [329]) signals the beginning of a new era, an idealistic synthesis of old and new. In its communitarian commitment to production, Goyo's model harks back to traditional values while, at the same time, it heralds the future that Asturias wished for his people. Time and time again, *Hombres* echoes and recasts its models, both political and literary. For this reason, as the resolution to the myth of genesis is deferred in the *Popol Vuh* until corn comes into being, Goyo's consecration as a corn farmer is protracted until the enemies of the sacred grain have been exterminated. This pause or suspended resolution between the first hero's (Gaspar's) death and the last hero's (Goyo's) victory helps explain the widespread misconceptions concerning this novel. *Hombres de maíz* does not lack unity. Its unifying principle is thematic and not dependent on character or chronological development but, rather, on three pivotal elements – fire, water, and corn – which harness the six tales together. As signifiers endowed with a complex system of reference, they refer not only to a Spanish concept but also to one or several elements of Mayan mythology. As we have seen, all Indians have a nexus with water and, through this element, both Gaspar and Goyo are specifically linked with Hunahpu and thus with the corn element (the former as begetter, the latter as discoverer and recipient).²⁵ Fire, ambivalent element of creation and destruction in the *Popol Vuh*, is associated in *Hombres de maíz* with the deer of the Seventh Fire, the dog (Jasmine), and the firefly wizards and is also the tool of revenge against the enemies of Ilóm. Most importantly, both antithetical elements (in their representation as sun and rain, fire and water) are fused in the symbolic conception of corn,

confirming Lévi-Strauss's observation that "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution" (*Structural Anthropology*, 224).

Asturias's novel is not unlike a fuge based on a theme and variations of the dichotomous pair and the product of their synthesis. It is not, in any event, a study of character development. Instead, the protagonists of the novel reap the benefits of earlier action as they substitute for one another in a logical chain. In the *Popol Vuh*, Hunahpu is donor while the man of maize is recipient of civilization.²⁶ In the same manner, in Asturias's novel, Gaspar Ilóm bestows upon Goyo Yic the symbolic riches of Maya-Quiché culture. Characters in both works stand at either end of a narrative chain, one as myth, the other as the human recipient and beneficiary of the mythic code.

Uneven Eve

As man's relationship with the land evolves from chaos to order in Asturias's first *neo-Indigenista* novel, so does his filiation with woman. The road to stability is treacherous, however, and by the time the action concludes at least one corpse is left in its wake. To begin with, each of the Indian wives in this palimpsest of Mayan mythology abandons her husband, and many female characters are portrayed as selfish and treacherous regardless of race and social class. It is true that the author interweaves the tales composing his favorite novel not long after a nasty divorce followed by a period of estrangement from his children. For this reason, it would be easy to conclude that he was licking his wounds and exorcising his first wife as he sifted through the culture of his ancestors. But the problem is much more convoluted and the ready-made imputation of dirty linen washed in public cannot explain it away. The truth of the matter is that, almost without exception, the female protagonists of each and everyone of Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* novels are pitiless toward men and all the female Indian characters in *Hombres de maíz* turn out to be runaways. This leads us to conclude that the author's biased mental image of the "fair sex" took shape before, and endured well beyond, the time when his difficulties with his first wife began.

The relationship between Gaspar Ilóm and his wife, Piojosa Grande, stands out as the first glaring example of aggression between the sexes in Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* novels. As we already know, the models for this couple were Sun and Moon, characters who, according to Mesoamerican tradition, spend their life bickering and unable to have genital intercourse because, if they did, "they would breed monsters."²⁷ Even if precedent for a devalued family relationship exists in Mayan mythology, it should be pointed out that the obsessive avoidance and departure motif that Piojosa and all the female protagonists in *Hombres de maíz* obsessively represent is wholly Asturias's own. In the only scene describing sexual intercourse in the novel, for instance, Piojosa shrinks back "like a blind hen" (5) as she climaxes, distinctly reminding the reader of the love scene in *El señor presidente*.

In the earlier work of fiction, Camila and Angel Face sleep under the same roof for many weeks without touching each other. The scene describing the eventual consummation of their marriage alternates with the description of their cook in hot pursuit of a chicken. As the lovemaking reaches the moment of climax, the chicken is caught and its neck twisted; in fact, the last beating of its wings is described immediately preceding the description of the blood that stains the marriage bed as both a symbol of lost virginity and a foreshadowing of Angel Face's tragic end ("Camila cerró los ojos . . . El peso de su marido . . . El aleteo . . . La queda mancha" [Camila closed her eyes . . . The weight of her husband's body . . . The beating of wings . . . The mild stain]; chap. XXXVIII).

The commingling of love and violence in *El señor presidente* is not without literary precedent, of course. The surrealists – to cite Asturias's most readily available frame of reference – incorporate it as a regular feature of their writing (Caws, 43). What is unusual in the portrayal is simply that, starting with *Hombres de maíz*, women's apparent lack of loyalty is collaterally connected with selfishness and cruelty in the very rare scenes where explicit sexual behavior is portrayed.²⁸ For instance, when Gaspar Ilóm offers his wife a gourd full of drink at an all-night celebration, she turns on her heels and begins "running like cascading water" because she realizes that he has just

been poisoned (19). Helping her husband is the last thing in Piojosa Grande's mind. On the contrary, she "could not get away fast enough, could not break the paths fast enough" (20). Her self-interest is only outdone by Vaca Manuela's treachery: Hers is the hand that pours the strychnine into the gourd and destroys the Indian fighting force. Not content with perpetrating one evil deed, Vaca Manuela betrays even her own sex when she whispers to Gaspar, "Piojosa's made off with your son," presumably in an attempt to have no one spared from the massacre (18).

Asturias's apparent rebuttal of conspicuously loyal women by counteracting their behavior through thinly disguised symbols is just as revealing of his conception of the female sex as his portrayal of runaway wives. Candelaria Reinoso, young Machojón's fiancé, in *Hombres de maíz*, is a case in point of how even solicitous, loving girls can be portrayed in ambiguous contexts that shade and even taint our initial impression of them. Let me begin by emphasizing that Candelaria fulfills in every way the conventional role held by females in a phallogocentric society. She lives for her fiancé and never marries after he disappears in a cloud of fireflies. Asturias loses no time in subverting this clichéd portrait, however.

Machojón's girlfriend runs a roadside stand where lard and pork products are sold. When a woman bearing the ill tidings of Macho's burning approaches the stand, she catches the poor girl red-handed, "with a blood sausage in her left hand and the knife she would use to cut it from the string in her right hand" (31). While the bearer of bad news speaks, Candelaria's movements are frozen in midair; with a great deal of insistence, the narrator indicates that she was "just standing there without cutting the sausage" and, still later, "not cutting the sausage for the boy, pale, her lips as white as yucca blooms" (32). It is only after the tragic message is fully delivered that "the blade of the knife in her left hand sliced through the greasy cord" (32).

Such insistence on knife, sausage, and slicing might seem purely coincidental. Asturias soon dispels any doubts readers might have as to his intentions by having Machojón's father declare: "The seed is finished, they have castrated the machos, because one of the machos didn't act like a macho, and that's why the Machojones are finished" (31). As it becomes plainly

evident later in the action, the ill-fated Machojón functions as an emblem of male prowess and virility in this novel. This can be gleaned from a number of well-intended references to his “uncastrated stallion” (220) and to the fact that his girlfriend has the habit of laying his “fierce-smelling sombrero” over her knees “so her body would smell of it for eight whole days” (34).

Asturias’s point is that the Machojones have lost their manhood by selling out to the interests of the commercial corn growers, and for this reason they must be punished. The punishment, as we have seen, is meted out in two figurative scenes. In one, the Macho is carried off by fireflies; in the other, he is symbolically castrated. Two features of the castration scene are particularly interesting: first, that it should be a woman – and the Macho’s own fiancée to boot – who wields the knife; second, that Candelaria should be symbolically portrayed in a role that sharply contrasts with her conventionally submissive personality. My point is that Asturias subverts the image of the loving wife by portraying women in ambiguous contexts that subliminally “correct” the impression readers may have of them. We conclude from the evidence that regardless of how females behave in his novels – whether they flee from their husbands or pine away when they die – the author manages to link them with punishment and unattainability, either explicitly or symbolically.²⁹

Unable to put Asturias on the couch, we can nonetheless adduce the following from his fiction: First, that he systematically casts women in a negative light, and second, that this negative attitude is most conspicuous in those works that he felt were the most difficult by virtue of their reliance on metaphor and allegory. Limited to the fiction though these observations are, it pays to view them within the context of the author’s personal life; in fact, speculating on the relationship between one and the other will shed a great deal of light on Asturias’s divergence from the conventions of mimetic narrative.

I once heard the English author Nigel Nicholson explain that he had published the story of his parents’ unusual relationship (*Portrait of a Marriage*) because he felt that the manuscript he found in his mother’s trunk after her death was written with the specific intention of being read by people other than those who played a part in the drama. In other words, Nicholson

went on, there were explanations and parenthetical expressions about the identities of the characters and the places where the events had occurred that convinced him his mother had intended it for an audience. In like manner, I feel that *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal* are strewn with clues of a biographical nature, that they are a sort of confession in code, as if Asturias had meant to exorcise and reveal the monsters that haunted him through his writing. These novels are like a long dream that begs to be interpreted; they have a political message and mythic underpinnings, but this does not take away from the fact that, as Vargas Llosa once said about García Márquez in *Historia de un deicidio*, they expose the "demons" that haunt the author.

The first, and most obvious, demon is unattainability. Beginning with the beautiful Tatuana in the *Leyendas de Guatemala* and continuing with Piojosa Grande, María Tecún, Miguelita de Acatán, Aleja Cuevas, Isabra Terrón, the honey-skinned Mulata, and Ninica in the play *Soluna*, most female protagonists in Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* stories have a penchant for running away. The Tatuana, that "little piece of Master Almond-tree's soul," cannot be possessed by any of the men who want her. Piojosa flees from Gaspar, and María leaves her blind husband, Goyo Yic, and takes away their children. Isabra, too, seems to abandon her Nicho, who tries to drown his sorrows in a bottle and is so actively encouraged in his liquid pursuit by Aleja Cuevas that he almost gives up the ghost. And all for a shawl that the poor man is bringing from his travels as a gift for his wife. Already in a drunken stupor, he will not let go of the prize that the proprietress of the bar has been coveting all night. When he finally falls unconscious, Aleja sees her chance to unroll the shawl from his arm. Even then, he will not let go of it, forcing Aleja to take more drastic measures:

She went behind the counter and took out a funnel . . . stuck it in a flask of the worst liquor, and took it over to where the postman lay. Señor Nicho closed his lips as she, like someone cleaning out a chicken, stuffed her fingers into his mouth to force his teeth apart. The funnel struck against his teeth, chipping them and making his gums bleed, until it was right inside his mouth. Like killing a snake, she thought, and started to pour. The drunk started choking, his throat was insufficient for the passage of the liquid, but she had to keep on pouring it down him. (181)

I have quoted this passage in its entirety because it gives us a clear idea of what, for lack of a better expression, we must refer to as Asturias's concept of feminine malevolence. It must be pointed out, however, that the display of this trait in *Hombres* is slight when compared to the ruthlessness that reigns in *Mulata*. In *Mulata*, female sadism makes Aleja Cuevas's criminal act seem pathetic by comparison; the *Mulata* and her female le-gions not only torture men, they also take endless pleasure in their victims' suffering. The incarnation of this sadistic attitude is the deadly Siguana, "who walks in the emptiness of her sex, the most solitary of pits" (111). This character is so deadly that the priest of Tierrapaulita feels obliged to instruct the harried Celestino Yumí as to her proclivities:

"The man who goes after her is blind and falls into her pit," he sermonizes, "she attracts him by her physical beauty, scarcely covered, and ready to turn into a vertical fall until he breaks his skull and body on the annihilating rocks. He falls and doesn't find love, but death, his eyes bugged out, his bones sticking out of his flesh, bloody vomit on his lips. . . . How many men disappear from their homes and one fine day it's discovered that they fell off a cliff!" (111)

The cliff that swallows men is, of course, a prolongation of "the crag of María Tecún" that draws wanderers lost in the pursuit of their runaway wives.³⁰ But in *Mulata*, Asturias is much more explicit in delineating the exact nature of this crag than he ever was in *Hombres*. The yawning pit that draws men to their deaths is, very clearly, the empty female sex, "the most solitary of pits" (111). Given such profound fear and rejection of women in the text, is it a wonder that Celestino is willing to sell his wife to the devil in order to "get even" with her? Is it surprising that Tazol, the demon who tempts him to give her up, should convince him with assurances that she will suffer in no small measure? "There's a better way to get even with your wife!" he promises Yumí. "Give her to me. I'll make her work until she's so tired she drops, I'll only give her what she needs to eat in order to survive. . . . She'll wear down her nails working so hard, her hair will fall out, she'll lose her teeth, and her skin will shrivel up from overuse, like ashes" (12).

One cannot help but wonder what was going on in Asturias's mind when he wrote these lines. Granted, *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal* are works of fiction, but isn't the insistence on feminine unattainability and the cruelty between the sexes a

little more than mere storytelling, especially when we consider that these obsessions are short of being ubiquitous? Even the yarn-spinning muleteer in *Hombres de maíz* tells his girlfriend, Aleja: "You treat me bad" (190); and so many wives leave their husbands that local folklore is forced to come up with an explanation for the rampant runaways: "These women," wag the tongues in the novel, have been given "pinole powder that spiders have crawled through" (186). "Once the powder . . . is given to the victim, [she] is at once assailed by the desire to escape from her house, to run away from her own ones, to forget and reject her children" (175). Fleeing from men is so customary that it becomes a leitmotif of popular songs. For instance, Hilario the muleteer is perpetually mourning the loss of Miguelita de Acatán, symbol of the unattainable ideal in the novel. He claims to have invented the girl himself in spite of the fact that she is such a part of the collective unconscious that her attributes and habits are sung by one and all. As we learn from her song, Miguelita is perfect because she "was coined in [the] image" of the "Heavenly Queen" making her not only ideal but, a priori, unreachable. In addition, like all the women in the novel, "when the Virgin moved to the Church, [Miguelita] vanished, *departed the town*" (my emphasis; 219).

In an ambitious although critically problematic early study on Asturias, Richard Callan suggests that the recurrent figuration of runaways in *Hombres de maíz* is meant to represent the search for the anima as Jung describes it.³¹ For Jung, the author of *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, the anima refers to the feminine components of the male psyche. In the early stages of ego consciousness, these feminine components are deliberately suppressed and cluster around the soul image while, at the same time, the masculine components of the psyche are strengthened. According to Jungian psychology, the most important task a human being can accomplish is to achieve inner equilibrium through individuation, a process whereby a living being becomes an autonomous and indivisible unit. Callan proposes that such self-realization is the very process that is delineated in Asturias's novel and he feels very strongly that Nicho Aquino is the beneficiary of the action because this character evolves throughout his symbolic journey.

The fifth chapter ("The Quest for the Feminine") of Callan's book is particularly illuminating even if, as Gerald Martin rightly suggests, "Jung es un instrumento que se adapta a todas las circunstancias" (*O.C.*, IV, xlv). Callan highlights how "a man generally experiences his anima through the woman he loves or through an idealized figure such as Hilario's 'Miguelita' (79), and he convincingly argues that characters in *Hombres de maíz* project "their inward vision of that 'absent woman,' the anima," unto the crag of María Tecún. In his opinion this crag, or gully, "refers literally to the void left by runaway wives, but figuratively it alludes to the missing half which man needs for completion, the feminine personification of the unconscious" (80). Given the characters' obsession with the pursuit of absent wives or girlfriends, Callan feels that *Hombres de maíz* is a novel that "can be read as a quest for the feminine – for the missing half" (79).

The presence of the "eternal feminine" as an explanation for the fleeing women of *Hombres de maíz* is plausible in many ways but does not clear up the mystery of absence in the novel, for two reasons. To begin with, while it is true that motifs of absence and flight are portrayed as part of a developmental scheme in the case of Goyo and Nicho, in and of themselves these motifs do not fully translate the tenor of Asturias's characterization. Clearly, fleeing, absence, and unattainability are but features within a larger, obsessional portrait of womanhood that also includes cruelty, mutilation, and castration anxiety as component elements. The second reason why Jungian psychology is not a particularly suitable tool in this instance is that, as it should be evident by now, Asturias was striving to create allegorical characters. In other words, his grand design calls for protagonists that are as little individuated as possible and function as emblems of good and evil. The drive toward individuation, which plays a fundamental role in Jung's grand design, is clearly antithetical to Asturias's aim to portray a family that represents – in its wide-encompassing, collective sense – the *hombres de maíz* as a whole.

In order to begin making some sense of the mystery of absence, we need to leave Callan's arguments behind and turn to Gerald Martin's illuminating "Estudio General" (*O.C.*, IV). With a characteristic combination of tenacity and discretion,

this critic dedicates several pages to the study of what he labels *ausencia* in *Hombres de maíz* and finds its roots in the holocaust of the Conquest as well as in "the relationship between natural man and civilized man, and between man and woman" (lxv). He further refers to Asturias's masterpiece as "the book of 'absence,' " which, in his eyes, is the author's "symbolical axis for exiles both real and metaphorical" (lxv–lxvi, note 51). Going straight to the heart of the matter, Martin also notes, "What is certain is that *Hombres de maíz* was put down on paper, as a novel, mainly in 1948 and 1949, after the death of his mother, Doña María Rosales de Asturias in May 1948" (lxvi). And, further, "It was precisely then . . . when Asturias met, in July of 1948, the woman that would become his second wife and when he began, apparently inspired by this second love relationship and by the *psychological liberation brought about by the death of Doña María*, the final stage in the creation of *Hombres de maíz*" (my emphasis; lxvii).

The truth is that Asturias's involvement with his mother cannot be overstated and yet, it has been mentioned only in passing by a handful of critics. For instance, from her well-documented perspective, Jimena Sáenz maintains that "Doña María would do anything for her favorite son" (32), and Luis López Alvarez notes that "Miguel Angel didn't like to talk about the important man he had become but, rather, about the child that he had been or the extremely thin youngster tenderly holding his mother's hand in an old photograph" (13). Secondary sources merely corroborate what Asturias himself makes evident in such poems as "Es el Caso de Hablar" and "Madre, tú me inventaste" and his two "Sonetos a María."³²

The first two poems are rather conventional in their imagery, but the "Sonetos" shed a great deal of light on the more blatant mysteries of Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* novels. Borrowing a figure of speech he had already used in the "Leyenda del Volcán," Asturias begins the first one referring to his mother as a "nest" or source of life ("eres María, nido paloma") and declaring his preference for her above all things "amo con el mejor de mis amores" (I love with the most my love can offer). Understandably enough, in the last verse of the same poem he clarifies that in spite of this great love, his mother is, by definition, unattainable, a fact that makes her comparable to a configura-

tion of stars: “y, sin embargo, para mí, María, eres constelación que no se toca.” What is less conventional and, for this very reason, of particular interest to our discussion is that this unattainability is portrayed as a cause of grief for the author: “eres constelación que no se toca / y adelantado mar de mi agonía” (You are an untouchable constellation / and the sea forecasting my agony).

Asturias’s profound identification with his mother is made even more explicit in the second “Soneto,” written before her death in 1948. The poet’s grief in the face of separation (he was in Mexico at the time) is here described as an unremediated personal shortcoming or mutilation: “Agonía del árbol sin raíces” (Agony of the rootless tree). Asturias’s nostalgia is made more poignant by distance; for this reason, he suggests a return to the past – to the time of childhood – in order to be able to recapture the love he has lost: “La memoria es raíz entre la sombra / los días de la infancia tan felices, / aquéllos del amor. Mi voz te nombra” (Remembrance is a root amidst the shadows / the days of happy childhood / those of love. My voice calls out your name).

The love imagery Asturias uses in this same “Soneto a María” – with its emphasis on “flames” and “burning” – seems hardly appropriate for a poem addressed to one’s mother: “me encandilo al decir cómo te llamas, / es perfume tu nombre en boca mía; / nos quemamos los dos, éramos llamas” (calling out your name, I burn / on my lips, your name is perfume / we burn both, flames together). Nor is the suggestion that María Rosales’s name is “perfume” on his lips despite the rather obvious metaphor of the rosebush. Such deep attachment explains the wound that cannot heal in the author and is described in the first verse: “yo sé que deshauciaron al enfermo / que sin ti no se cura sino muerto.” Asturias’s sickness, “which only death can heal,” is clearly brought about by a yearning that, by definition, cannot be soothed. The body of the mother, forbidden above all things, would explain the *ausencia* that permeates his writings.

I do not think it in any way farfetched to suggest that the unquenchable longing that Asturias expresses in all his writings is directly connected to the very ambiguous love that he reveals in the two “Sonetos a María.” I say this fully aware that of all the arguments presented in this book, this one will be the most

difficult to accept. And yet I feel it is crucial to voice it, for only by coming to terms with it can we begin to understand the nature of this author's literary invention and realize why it is that he is at the forefront of the kind of revolutionary Latin American novel that breaks with the mimetic tradition typical of Western literature until Joyce.

Doubtlessly, the notion that Asturias's *neo-Indigenismo* breaks with convention in a startling new way is something no one will disagree with. As we have seen, the protagonists of his fiction substitute for one another; the action skips from one setting to the next, from one time frame to another; truths become legends and legends are recognized as truths. In *Mulata de tal* iconoclasm knows no bounds: All characters die, the air stops moving (302), the world is torn to pieces, and the syntax is eroded in a nineteen-page description held together by means of ellipses. Humans become indistinguishable from animals (302) and the living from the dead.³³ The very essence of literature is pulverized and the book ends with "a total muteness. Not only of what is communication, tongue, language, speech, song, noise. . . . The silence, the silence itself was also silent between the earth and the sky" (305).

Not content with simply demolishing literary conventions, in *Mulata* Asturias also breaks with natural laws (animals speak, humans tear each other to pieces, steal each other's sexual organs, glue back their arms, join half of one mutilated body to a "skeletal woman") and defies sexual mores (treatment of obscene matters – coprophilia, homosexuality, necrophilia – is rampant).

Writing in such open defiance of the law has been identified and discussed by Julia Kristeva in some of her most illuminating writing. The French critic and psychoanalyst takes pains to distinguish between what she refers to as "symbolic" and "semiotic" discourse in her sometimes hermetic, sometimes brilliant, *Polylogue*. As language, body, conscious, and unconscious cannot be separated from each other, Kristeva begins her discussion by referring to the powerful relationship that binds an infant to the maternal body. This body, as we know from Lacan, is the primary source of desire in both senses of the word "primary." For this reason, the infant becomes the rival of the father until the latter sets down the law forbidding the body of

the mother.³⁴ If the infant is capable of recognizing and assimilating this law (what Lacan refers to as internalizing the “name of the father”), it succeeds in resolving its Oedipal complex and will adopt the father and the law he represents as behavioral models. It is also possible, on the other hand, that the child’s attachment to the mother (or, for that matter, the mother’s attachment to the child) may be of such magnitude that the father will be unable to sever the affective bond between them. In this case, the infant’s identification shall be with the maternal body and all that it implies.

What Kristeva underscores in *Polylogue* is that both of these possible identifications become translatable in literary terms. In her opinion, authors like Mallarmé and Joyce work through the paternal function by reacting against it, not only ideologically but also in the way they disaffect conventional language and substitute their own nonnormative discourse for it.³⁵ Refusing the logical, coherent, and law-abiding strictures of symbolic discourse, certain authors (among whom Asturias and Severo Sarduy must be included) identify instead with the non-expressive form of articulation that Kristeva defines as the semiotic. This transgression translates itself as an out-and-out battle against the conventions of grammar, syntax, and the recognized correlation between signifiers and signifieds that give the mimetic novel its coherence. Because these authors strip the word from its classical sense of plenitude, their narrative discourse will no longer be a reflection of the world. What in mimetic literature is a specular relationship between signifier and signified becomes frayed, pluralized in a novel like *Hombres de maíz*, where each Indian character is linked to an element, an animal, a color, and a number, and where a vowel from one character’s name (María Tecún) can allude to her symbolic nexus with the Mayan moon goddess (my emphasis).

I have no doubt that the identification with the maternal forms the bedrock of Asturias’s semiotic writing and explains his iconoclasm, especially when we consider that the symbolic discourse that results from internalizing the paternal law is the very model of the monotheistic culture that dominates Western thought (Kristeva, *Polylogue*, 16). The author of *Mulata* turns his back on this culture and, instead, flings open the doors that allow the indigenous violence and eroticism to seep into his

fiction.³⁶ As Martin rightly notes, the fact that Asturias seems to have equated his father, "in spite of his apparent weakness of character," with the "Spanish" side of the family and his mother with the "más mestiza e incluso más indígena" side also explains the choices he makes as an author of fiction (*O.C.*, IV, lxvi). Clearly, it is this equation that inspires his desire to portray and validate the Indian culture that in his mind his mother represents.³⁷

When she dies, in May 1948, a symbolic (and unutterable) *ausencia* becomes all of a sudden translatable into literary terms. This is why, when Gerald Martin refers to "a psychological liberation brought about by Doña María's death," he is not mincing words.³⁸ The death of María Rosales allows Asturias to sublimate his grief into socially acceptable literary terms (which he nonetheless takes great pains to disguise by means of a very elaborate allegorical shroud). The seminal role played by the author's mother becomes most apparent in the last chapter of *Hombres de maíz*, when the curer-deer of the Seventh Fire informs Nicho that María Tecún is neither María Tecún nor María Zacatón.³⁹ Dumbfounded by this revelation, the coyote-mailman then asks him: "If it isn't María Tecún and it isn't María Zacatón, who is this stone, Deer of the Seventh Fire?" (327). The curer wastes no time in replying "that in that stone was hidden the soul of María the Rain" (327). With remarkable sleight of hand, Asturias amalgamates all the runaways in the novel into one, whose name, María, is the very one that in his own system of references is emblematic of the unattainable.

It is this profound and fundamental unattainability that keeps me from agreeing with Martin's suggestion that in *Hombres de maíz* Asturias traces, step by step, his "reconciliación con lo femenino" (*O.C.*, IV, lxxviii). As I indicated earlier, the blueprint for this novel translates Arévalo's and Asturias's struggle for Indian rights and both men's wish to encourage the rural population of Guatemala to return to traditional farming practices. The reunion between Goyo and María in the epilogue is truly in keeping with the president's scheme for his nation but completely dissonant with the author's own profound and wholly unresolved relationship with women. *Hombres de maíz* is not a reconciliation, as Martin would have it, because sublimation is not a cure but a symptom. By this I mean that portraying the return to order in the epilogue translates the author's *po-*

litical aims but does not cure him of his deep-seated longing. It is true that Goyo Yic's and María Tecún's reunion and return to Pisigüilito bridge the chasm between men and women in *Hombres de maíz*,⁴⁰ but let us be very clear about one thing: If Asturias were truly "reconciled with the feminine," as Martin suggests, would he write a fire and brimstone, antifeminine manifesto like *Mulata de tal*? Even if he should, why would he bring together rampant sadism and the most flagrant lust for the female body in the same novel? How can such ambivalence be explained?

Ambivalence turns out to be a consistent feature of Asturias's portrayal.⁴¹ The female characters in his fiction are pictured as simultaneously fleeting and desirable or, like the *Mulata*, as cruel and appealing, ungraspable and – for this very reason – perpetually frustrating (like the woman in Asturias's poem "Invierno": "En rodillas de viento, galgo y huella / fui tras de ti, mujer en mi presencia / transportada por ágil luz de estrella / de sentido en sentido hasta la ausencia" [On knees of wind, greyhound and footprint / I tracked you, woman in my presence / carried by nimble starlight / from sense to sense unto absence]; 829). Asturias finds ample precedent for his ambiguous portrayals in Mesoamerican mythology. For instance, Tlazolteotl, the goddess of filth and of confession, is also the patroness of carnal love and sexual perversion (Martin, *O.C.*, IV, 403). Moreover, "the Quiché Maya think of dualities in general as complementary rather than opposed, interpenetrating rather than mutually exclusive," a notion that makes the congress of the desirable and the objectionable a plausible idea for Asturias (Tedlock, 63). But, actually, the concept of a marriage of opposites finds a predisposed listener in Asturias from the start. In his mind, an attraction to the opposite sex is, first and foremost, a longing for the woman with whom he wholly identified since childhood. At the same time, such attraction is obviously associated with the forbidden, a fact that compels him to portray the opposite sex as unattainable.⁴² The problem is that unattainability is also a state that maintains the poet perpetually frustrated. Such frustration becomes in turn translated as anger and resentment vis-à-vis women in general.

To compound matters, life deals Asturias a hand that seems to confirm his skewed perception of the opposite sex. As Jack Himelblau observes, the first women the author loves seem to

have spurned him ("Love, Self and Cosmos," 243).⁴³ In addition, his marriage to Clemencia Amado turns sour and exacerbates his unconscious resentment. (This is why readers should not be surprised to find that even in his most openly loving poems to her, such as "Amada Tropical" and "Responso," images of death, "tu vestido / sepulcro tibio" [your dress / warm sepulchre] and "Todavía no. . . . Con el no de la tierra a los sepulcros" [Not yet . . . with the earth's rebuttal of the grave] commingle with expressions of desire, "Tu boca me place en la cara, besa" [I like your lips upon my face, kiss]; 859.)

In sum, then, even though Asturias was profoundly drawn to women all his life, his fiction reveals how, consciously or not, he felt psychologically unable to hold on to them. His recurrent descriptions of austere runaways, barren wives, and lascivious hussies are in sharp contrast with, for instance, García Márquez's joyous celebration of feminine sensuality and wisdom. This is why I again disagree with Martin when he refers to *Hombres de maíz* as the "novel about the triumph of matriarchal consciousness" (*O.C.*, IV, lxviii). Even if it is true that Asturias lived surrounded by women as a child and that his mother's business talent and tenacious spirit offered the growing boy what Martin describes as "a somewhat colossal inversion of the patriarchal model" (*O.C.*, IV, lxvi), it is evident that this inverted model does not become translated into fiction.

Clearly, the action in *Hombres de maíz* evolves from the kind of patriarchal society featured in its chap. I through an interim phase that can best be described, it is true, as having both nomadic and matriarchal features (María Tecún raises her family independently and Goyo Yic roams the countryside in search of her). Immediately preceding this phase, the symbolic death of Gaspar Ilóm brings about the exile of all destructive forces that disable the inception of the social order. After this character jumps into the river, all the enemies of Ilóm are exterminated and the country is described as a world in turmoil: Women run away, families break apart, maize fields are swallowed whole by the flames of revenge. The outcome of all this chaos is nonetheless positive: The blind learn to see and the deaf to listen; characters and readers alike are instructed about forgotten traditions and ancestral truths; women flee and thereby force their mates to search for them, a quest that translates itself as a

rite of passage leading to self-discovery. But even if some female characters in the novel allow order to be reinstated, there should be no doubt that the *conciencia matriarcal* alluded to by Martin is but a phase that culminates in the patriarchal, agricultural society described in the epilogue. Back in Pisigüilito with the many members of his extended family, Poppa Possum returns to the time-honored practice of harvesting corn. He is the novel's cynosure, and not María; he, and no other, is the living heir to the social model cast under the symbolic auspices of the dead Gaspar Ilóm.

Asturias's characters may well pursue elusive females in perpetual flights of fancy. But the women, for reasons that are profoundly embedded in the author's psyche, are unattainable. In *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal* desire is present, but its fulfillment is chimerical. It does act as a catalyst that brings about social change, but this does not make women particularly praiseworthy. Quite the contrary, actually. The many Marías, runaways by nature, draw men more often to "the most solitary of pits" than to the fertile fields of Pisigüilito, mirroring in their behavior the author's ambivalent feelings of longing and guilt.

Coyote's covenant

Such longing is nowhere more evident than in the novel's final chapters. In chap. XIII, for example, Nicho-Coyote will bite his tail when he comes home and finds his wife missing. Recalling sundry tales of runaways trekking through the mountains, he will think of her as a "*tecuna*" and once again, the reader will read or think he reads the tale of the elusive and treacherous moon, transfigured. But in the sixth and final fable of *Hombres de maíz*, more than in any other, things are not what they seem. Having delineated the boundaries of rivalry and described or suggested the skirmishes between traitors and heroes and husbands and wives, Asturias had to bring the two camps together, to bridge the gap and palliate, if not resolve, the pandemic curse of dissension in the novel.

As we have seen, throughout the better part of *Hombres* the *Popol Vuh* is alluded to in veiled references. But starting in chap. XIII, Asturias begins to identify his sources and convey the

sum and substance of his work. The narrative form, if not the writing style, is consistent with the tenet of preceding chapters: a dialogue between two voices who never address each other – a mailman who can't deliver and a tattling muleteer who, like all fathers of fiction, wiles away many an hour busily spinning lies.

As the chapter begins, Nicho Aquino comes home to an empty house. The faint but lingering smells, the howling wind, and creaking doors are all painful indications that his wife, Isabra, is gone. Aquino gets drunk to forget what he wants most to remember and is saved, in the nick of time, by the arrival of a pack of kindhearted muleteers who find him at death's door, on the floor of Aleja Cueva's bar. Three weeks later, dirty and beaten but manifestly recovered from his drinking bout, he sets out for the capital with the bags of mail on his back. He will not be alone in his journey, however. By the time he sets off from the village of Three Waters, a mysterious old man with black hands joins him in his pilgrimage. By and by, the wise old creature sounds out Nicho about the breed of men who exploit the soil for profit: "And what they're doing now is even more uncivilized, growing maize to sell it," he complains (203). The mailman listens and learns; as Goyo had perceived existence directly through the "little windows" that Chigüichón Culebro opens in his face, Nicho discovers the essence of things from the lips of this man, who turns out to be one of the firefly wizards. But the mailman is not immediately convinced. It is not that he defends the corn growers but simply that, through lack of understanding and force of habit, he fails to see their commerce as sacrilege: "What you say is right," he tells the sorcerer, "but it hasn't been explained to all of us" (205). And later: "But what I say is, how can they clothe their families if they don't sell the maize?" (205). Generations of service under a foreign establishment have numbed the man of maize; he has become a marionette on colonial strings who tolerates the curse imposed on his people: "The true man, the true woman which there is, that is to say, there was, in each man and each woman, has departed from them forever, and all that is left is the outside, the puppet, puppets with the duties of sedentary folk" (292).

In *El señor presidente* Asturias had portrayed the horror of totalitarianism as well as the fear that turns men into passive herds. In *Hombres de maíz* he once again analyzes the plight of

the exploited, but the difference between the two novels is worthy of note. Pelele's cry of anguish in the earlier novel is doubly poignant in that he is a victim of the present who lacks the resources of the past. Not so the Indian in *Hombres*. In contrast to the white man's superficial edifice, the institutions and laws of Mesoamerican man stand as the emblems of a rich tradition that defines and sustains him. Asturias, like Arévalo, puts in his people's hands the weapons of culture and makes clear that the Indians' survival depends on the recognition of a heritage that Gaspar and his revolt have made attainable. It is this recognition that is offered to both Nicho and Goyo, previously blind to the truth – and words in *Hombres de maíz* always lead to action.

The sorcerer begins by telling Nicho that he knows his wife's whereabouts; soon after, both men leave the Camino Real and head for what turns out to be an underground sanctuary.⁴⁴ Before having access to knowledge, however, Nicho must sever all ties with the white man's commerce and lies and burn the mailbags that have become second nature to him. He fights to defend them, but his longing to "fill the emptiness of absence" and find his wife wins out over his sense of duty (206). In the end, "flames the color of tapirs with probing tongues, flames with tangled manes of gold like little lions" wear down the resistance of the striped canvas bags (294). This immolation turns out to be an indispensable apostasy: Nicho's soul, body, and understanding are all transfigured by it. Thereafter, his ears become as open to death (his wife's accident) as they are to life (the origins of man according to the Mayan genesis).⁴⁵ He casts off his "human shell," emblem of fealty, and "on his four extremities of howl with hairs" renews the bond with an ancestral past that, for the first time in his life, is present (295). Nicho hears the story of Gaspar Ilóm (whose death signals the rebirth of hope), as well as the tales of retribution announcing the end of the evil curse. What is more important, he hears "all that had happened long ago as though it were happening now" (304). The buckle of narrative time fastens to an end that is really a beginning.

Nicho-Coyote, recipient of "truth," is at the same time its transmitter to the reader (who is made to understand the narrative enigmas through him). Clearly, the sphere of action of this character is delineated on the basis of well-known cultural

models. In fact, the mailman's nexus with Mayan religious ritual is evident from the beginning of chap. XVIII. For instance, both his continence and the ceremonial body makeup he puts on as he enters the caves ("he painted eyes on his face, hands and feet . . . under the direction of the old man") are fully in keeping with ceremonial practices in Mesoamerica (*Hombres*, 289). According to Eric Thompson, periods of preceremonial continence were normally reckoned in Mayan twenty-day months "or in the highly important thirteen day 'week,'" which is exactly the time Nicho spends underground. In addition, Nicho's patronymic, Aquino, is a Hispanization of the name given to priests of the sun god in Mayaland: Ah Kin. Furthermore, in Chorti the name of the solar deity is also Ah Kin, "He of the sun," and he is viewed as patron of knowledge (which Nicho seeks, finds, and "delivers"), power, the priesthood, and writing (Coe, 179). This last attribution is corroborated in the *Vienna Dictionary*, which describes Kinchahau (the Yucatec name of Ah Kin) as an "idol whom they adored who was a man for having discovered the art of writing of this land." Nominally speaking, Nicho is also the "defender of letters" who brings words or "civilized lies" to the puppets who will no longer heed the truths of their Mayan ancestors.

The role of the Ah Kin is to interpret and communicate the religious mysteries that are the backbone of Mayan culture. In keeping with tradition, the reader becomes recipient of truth and is given to understand the novel's import through Aquino. Nicho is a point of convergence, a mediator between arcane knowledge and its beneficiaries, between Goyo and María (whom he brings together in chap. XIX) and between fire and water, which he simultaneously embodies in his *nahual*: "And he, without saying it, proclaims himself a coyote, with teeth from a cob of white maize . . . four paws of running rain, blazing eyes of liquid fire" (297).

We have seen how in the Mayan genesis man is not created until oppositions are resolved and, symbolically – through the divine pair of Hunahpu and Xbalanque – fire and water are conjoined. In the same manner, Nicho-Coyote and the curer-deer of the Seventh Fire are the only characters who, to borrow Lévi-Strauss's expression, "master" both fire and water, the two elements emblematic of dissension in *Hombres de maíz*. It is in

the mailman's own body and through his person that the dialectic in the novel is resolved, when, like Hunahpu in the *Popol Vuh*, he journeys toward the west and exits renewed from the underworld. Despite the importance of his role in the novel, however, it is imperative to point out that Nicho is not the beneficiary of the action but, rather, a cog in the wheelworks. *Hombres* is not his story or Gaspar's or even Goyo and María's. It is the tale of a people, and all its characters are links in the chain of renewal, means to an end. As Martin observes, in *Hombres*, "el hombre se vuelve tribu y especie . . . el hombre deja atrás su individualidad" (*O.C.*, IV, xciv).⁴⁶

Asturias orchestrates the last section of his first *neo-Indigenista* novel like a two-canon fugue. On one level, we read the adventures and discoveries of the mailman in pursuit of his wife; on the other, we have the ruminations of the town tattler sent to protect him from the perilous crag of María Tecún; in the last chapters of the novel one protagonist learns while the other prattles. Once they leave for the capital, the two never meet, but their tales end up becoming a sort of counterpoint to each other: The two independent "melodies" or story lines are cunningly combined into a single harmonic texture in which each retains its linear character.

Tall tales made to order

Nicho the postman and Hilario Sacayón the town tattler are not so exceptional in terms of their behavior because, by and large, all characters in *Hombres de maíz* are either talkers or doers. The ones that act are usually described by the ones who talk, and their distorted descriptions are always glaring transformations of the truth. This back-and-forth between reality and fiction typifies a number of modern novels – from Stern's *Tristram Shandy* to Unamuno's *Niebla* – but what is unique about Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* novel is that the bones of his literary creation are laid bare not merely to motivate the reader's response but, specifically, to nurture it.

When Asturias began to orchestrate the bits and pieces of his eulogy to the men of maize, his overriding intention was to educate his public. Like President Arévalo's, his aim was to transform Guatemala into a modern state and "to begin a period of

sympathy for the man who works in the fields, in the shops, on the military businesses," in short, "to make men equal to men" (Dion, 116). To suggest that Asturias merely sided with the newly elected president would be a gross understatement, for the policies of one are in many ways inextricable from the prose of the other. The distinction between them was methodological rather than ideological; their goal was always the same, different only in the way to attain it. While Arévalo set out to transform Guatemala physically by giving land to the peasants, Asturias strove to transfigure the soul and conscience of his people. This is why in *Hombres de maíz* he denounces the exploitation of the soil and the plight of the Indian and, for the first time in his fiction, offers a remedy and shows his countrymen the path to recovery. The education of the "men of maize" would be initiated through the written word, their renewal effected by redrafting the social contract with ideas that, if executed, would crystallize into "the architecture of the new life" that he had expressed as early as 1928.⁴⁷

Out in the country roads and city streets of Guatemala, Arévalo's policies were ample proof that change was possible. But change had to spring from the inside, arise from personal conviction. Gradually, Asturias's self-designated mission became to show the sovereign role of man in the historical process and to convince Guatemala that exercised belief in a cause would bring about social transformation. To elicit the readers' response and convince his people of the need for renewal, he opted to reveal the genetic process of his literary discourse, to show how a tale comes into being, and demonstrate the role of individuals in the development of myth. The method he used to underscore man's ability to imagine and transform is unquestionably convincing: He bombards the reader with categorical duplicity by juxtaposing the events of his novel with refurbished versions of what we read until all elements of "truth" are winnowed out and only a layer of meaning issuing from a collective process of transformation is left behind.

The character of María Tecún, a scrawny, overburdened redhead, is a case in point of this transmutational grammar. After she leaves her blind husband, she is cast as a wanton harridan in the public eye and, because of her allegedly vile example,

any woman leaving her mate is thereafter referred to as a "*tecuna*." In addition, all wayward strays are said to lure their love-blind husbands to the "ridge of María Tecún," where the smitten swains hurl themselves into the void in the hope of reaching, at long last, the fickle body of the runaway.⁴⁸ The *tecuna's* behavior is immutable and held in contempt by all characters in the novel for whom María Tecún is, like the moon goddess in Mayan mythology, the emblem of the wanton and faithless wife.⁴⁹ And yet nothing could be further from the facts. The reader is familiar with María's tale and fully aware that her husband never jumps to his death, nor, for that matter, does the other "*tecunado*" in the novel, Nicho Aquino. Rather than being wanton and reckless like the moon, María is true-hearted and scrupulous. If she leaves Goyo it is, as she later tells him, "not because I didn't care for you, but because if I'd stayed we'd have had another ten children by now, and we couldn't have coped; for your sake, for their sake, for my sake. What would the kids have done without me; and you with your eyes like that" (322).

The reader is compelled to confront two conflicting narratives during the protagonists' reunion in chap. XIX. At this juncture, one tale (that of María, the fickle wife) is juxtaposed to another (that of María, the faithful mother), and the characters of one account reach out to bridge the gap and address the living legends from the other: "So you are the famous María Tecún?" asks Nicho in amazement (325). And she, mortified, "Would you mind telling me . . . why famous?" "Why? Because of the stone, because of the ridge, because of the tecunas," blurts out the postman at the hell-bent hussy who is, in all evidence, no more than an undernourished and hard-lived housewife (325). Fact and fiction come face to face at this point in the novel, or, as María puts it: "So you've heard about the rock, too. . . . Well, yes, that's me — a stone there and a person here" (325).

Nothing is what it seems in *Hombres de maíz*, or rather, everything is what it seems and, in addition, what it is made out to be. All that is written in the novel is fiction by definition, all truth illusion but, in the same manner and by virtue of the mimetic contract, all illusion taken for truth — an analogy that

allows Asturias to postulate, implicitly, that myth and reality are inextricable from each other, one and the same in the context he portrays.

This reversible axiom conjures up in turn one of the major premises of magic realism. In the prologue to the original edition of *Kingdom of This World*, Alejo Carpentier advances the idea that events become unequivocally marvelous when they arise "from an unexpected transformation of reality" (10), clearly, the very process quintessential to the development of *Hombres de maíz*. Asturias's novel transforms reality on two levels, moreover. First, as we have seen, it is a palimpsest of myths set forth in the Quiché-Maya *Popol Vuh*; so, too, it is a recasting of the gossip exchanged between neighbors and friends. Throughout, the reader is made fully aware of this process of adaptation, allowed to observe the very genesis of local myth that, all too naturally, casts a light on the generative principle of fiction in general. As depicted in *Hombres de maíz*, man is ruled by dogma, swayed by an array of consensual beliefs that are nothing other than historical events, "facts," refurbished or fictionalized by his forebears. Living according to cultural codes man accepts to be governed by the fiction of his ancestors; myth and facts, literature and reality, are thus shown as inextricably wed to each other.

More than any other character in *Hombres*, the muleteer Hilario Sacayón grasps the import of this homology and mirrors Asturias as the inveterate teller of tales. His love of "literature" is such that his cronies maintain, "(Hilario) got more affection for fiction than fact, he's a poet" (275). Benighted, they couple poetry with untruth, a mistake that casts at first a glaring light on that other poet, Hilario's alter ego and begetter of all tales in *Hombres de maíz*. Asturias does share with the muleteer a belief that imagined things seem to turn out real but, unlike him, he apportions his own love between reality and fiction, demonstrating how one can spring from the other because human beings can recast events to suit themselves and are fully capable of transforming dreams into action.

Characters in this novel may well perceive Hilario's tale-telling ability as ineffectual fabrication, but Asturias soon makes us aware of the crucial role of myth in the foundation of culture. The reader is made to realize that Hilario's fables de-

velop a life of their own and have a way not only of becoming confused with reality but, more importantly, of being accepted as gospel truth. The rustic muleteers may well give the “poet” – “This idiot just likes to talk about things he knows nothing about” (186) – what they are never made to suspect is that, in Asturias’s scheme, poetic imagination and the power of words set the stage from which new beliefs (and, therefore, evolution) will come about. And so Hilario moves on across the pages of the novel, undaunted by banter and untangled by yarns, the prototype of the poet-creator in Asturias’s cunningly didactic plot. And when Nicho the postman leaves the town of Acatán with the mail on his back, Hilario is hired to follow and safely escort him past the alluring ridge of María Tecún.

The two men never meet, but the muleteer does run into many of the characters who appear in the preceding episodes. Neighbors from a distance, all knowing each other, they exchange gossip and news. Shared knowledge, “factual” or invented, forms the bonds of their community. Their lives are open to the scrutiny of readers for the most part of five tales, but not entirely. The stories of Machojón, Candelaria Reinosá, Gaspar Ilóm, and María Tecún also evolve independently from the text, that is to say, outside the narrative. These characters disappear from the pages of the novel, and when the reader picks up their thread once again, time has transpired and they have changed: Gaspar Ilóm, dead in action but living among the “invencibles,” has a gray-white thatch on his head, and Candelaria has grown dowdy and a bit rumped (340). The life of myths, as that of “living” characters, evolves but with one major difference: Legendary figures and their designs are both durable and commanding. When the sorcerers curse Colonel Godoy’s soldiers with sterility and one of their wives becomes pregnant, her child is said to be her own by another man, “un su hijo suyo de otro” (286); the legendary curse, organic precept in the land of Ilóm, cannot be mistaken.

It is not that “man is trapped by legend” in *Hombres de maíz*, as Ariel Dorfman suggests (250); I would say, on the contrary, that he is freed by it, for popular belief creates a constant *desdoblamiento* that widens the otherwise narrow boundaries of the daily routine portrayed in mimetic fiction. Dorfman’s argument is, nonetheless, well taken insofar as legend directs and

conditions character behavior in the novel. As Don Deferic, the German magnate of Pisigüilito, maintains: "These people are sacrificed so the legend may live" (211). In fact, this aphorism, more or less reversed, is likewise viable in the context of *Hombres de maíz* where legends are born to give characters a reason for being. As one of them observes, "I could tell you some stories . . . maybe that's why history was invented, so we could forget the present," a suggestion pivoting ambiguously on the connotation of a single word (245).

On the one hand, history is a tale or story heightening the importance of language in the constitution of culture and pinpointing man's ability to formulate events that describe the world as he sees it or, sometimes, as he wishes it to be seen. History is also the chronological record of significant events that, as in the above quote, are situated in the past. And not surprisingly. Yesteryear is often the Indian's only anesthetic against the encroachment of a bitter present that is in every way a perpetuation of a life mode disruptive to their own historic process.

History as an account and history as a chronological record, interwoven as they are, chart the clauses of Asturias's meditation on the meaning of culture, on the network of ethical, moral, mental, and behavioral patterns that define a people and are transmitted as knowledge to succeeding generations. To him, manifestly, myth is the bedrock of culture and culture the trail of civilization somewhat transformed by the imagination of men. The men of maize have lost or forgotten their roots and thus their history, and Asturias goes back not only to the source but to its preamble. He portrays the way history is made, the manner in which people become one and communities are formed. Most significantly, Asturias's fictional portrayal is an actualization, a remembrance of things past. As the ancient *Popol Vuh* conjoins men and maize, the author of *Hombres de maíz* brings together the hero of his novel and the sacred grain in an allegory of origins that is in every way an apotheosis of the agricultural state he wishes for his people.

At the conclusion of his panegyric to traditional Indian values, Goyo and his family become ants "to carry home the maize" (329). In this sentence, as I have indicated, Asturias

identifies his protagonist with the insect that, according to Maya-Quiché tradition is responsible for the discovery of corn. But this is not all. Because the *Popol Vuh* teaches us that corn dough is the substance used to mold "our first fathers, the four human works" (164), Goyo's final transformation is a clear indication of his ability to produce the flesh and blood of that no longer fictional breed, the "*hombres de maíz*" whose return to the land was being made possible by Arévalo's agrarian reform proposals.

To paint a picture of hope and renewal, Asturias looks back to the ancient myths of Mesoamerica. The act of reminiscence is as important to him as it is to Hilario, and both hark back to their roots in terms of this. For the Maya all knowledge is remembrance, a tenet that makes Asturias simultaneously traditional and modern in his outlook: traditional, because his novel is conceived as a repetition of a sacred epic; modern, because he uses repetition in order to make an accomplice of the reader, to solicit our participation in an ongoing process of creation. By portraying events in the present (such as the tale of Gaspar Ilóm in chap. I) and later restating them as though they were part of a distant past, Asturias suggests that time evolves beyond the confines of the novel and, more importantly, that the reader, by virtue of sharing the knowledge of events that have become part of the narrative past, is ensnared within this purely fictitious chronological structure. Fictitious or not, we are given a sense of belonging, of being part of the author's grand design, and lifted from a role of passive acceptance (as readers) to one of active involvement.

Plainly, then, the act of remembering, binding together readers and characters, is a crucial ingredient in Asturias's scheme. As in real life, the fathers of myth in *Hombres de maíz* sow the soil from which both literature and civilization spring by remembering events that may or may not have taken place. Hilario hears bits and pieces of a tale about ill-requited love and, spurred from a night of drinking, claims to invent the story of Miguelita de Acatán, a faithful seamstress who, abandoned by the man she loves, can be heard every midnight droning away her sorrow at her sewing machine. Hilario's tale falls on favorable ground and the townspeople, after singing it in coplas and

repeating it as legend, come eventually to believe it as gospel truth. Someone searches the parish registry for Miguelita's birth certificate and masses are held for her soul. Hilario himself falls in love with his creation, a feature that encourages Richard Callan to see Miguelita as one of the many unattainable women in the novel, when actually, by virtue of her fictional (and therefore internalized) status, she is more within reach than any other woman in a plot where all couples are systematically torn asunder. In a chaotic world where life's most elemental principle – the sacred link between men and maize – is trampled underfoot, things are bound to fall apart. Man can find truth only within himself, and his thought is bound to crystallize into action. As Hilario fully recognizes: "Whenever I start imagining things they seem to turn out real" (225). Miguelita, his dream and his creation, is "as real and as living and breathing as any other person" (272).

If Hilario breathes life into his dreams by merely wishing it, Asturias does no less by setting down his hopes on paper. His conception of an agricultural state overseen by the prolific figure of the father as portrayed in the epilogue of *Hombres de maíz* is in every way an idealistic conceptualization of dreams through words in an effort to "motivate" reality. As improbable as this idea may seem, it must not be forgotten that Asturias has always claimed what is a basic tenet to all Indians of Mesoamerica: "To be able to put an exact name on something means to reveal it" (quoted by Harss and Dohmann, 83). To him, a shadow never falls between the idea and the reality; on the contrary. As Luis Harss points out, "for Asturias, language lives a borrowed life. Words are echoes or shadows of living things" (81).

This line of thinking is not unique to Asturias but is evinced in one form or another by all exponents of magic realism, from Carpentier to García Márquez, as well as by many in Latin America whose practice has brought them in contact with Indian thought. Octavio Paz, for example, feels that words are "doubles of objects in the external world and are therefore an animated part of it" (Harss and Dohmann, 81). This widespread belief explains not only why Hilario thinks that imagined things seem to turn out real but, more significantly, why the return to communal agriculture is spoken as the final mes-

sage of *Hombres de maíz*. For the Indian as well as for Asturias, “words are fundamental, magic elements endowed not only with powers of witchcraft and enchantment but also with miraculous healing powers” (Harss and Dohmann, 83). If language not merely provokes action but is already action frozen within the marrow of words, writing could also mean recording what was to become (or remembering what had already been). In 1946 Guatemala was still an ailing body and Asturias was determined to try all remedies to nurse it back to health. It was only natural that he should turn most specially to the magical medicine of language that his Indian ancestors had come to know so well.

This is not to say that man must rely on or believe in fiction even when he heeds the power of words. Hilario Sacayón is, once again, a case in point. Myth is essential to Hilario, but his attitude about it is totally ambivalent. The townspeople’s belief in Miguelita, for instance, gives him a certain amount of critical distance vis-à-vis legends in general. He casts more than a shadow of doubt on María Tecún’s tale on the very sensible grounds that if, after all, he had invented the tale of the seamstress piecemeal, María’s myth might likewise be someone’s creation. Moncha, a clever old woman, is quick to correct him:

We often think we’ve invented things that other people have forgotten. When you tell a story that no one tells anymore, you say: I invented this, it’s mine. But what you’re really doing is remembering – you, through your drunkenness, remembered what the memory of your forefathers left in your blood. (217)

Obviously, the suggestion in this instance is that myth is part of a collective unconscious and, as Moncha goes on to imply, man’s mental fiction – his “literature” – fulfills a human need. Hilario will confirm her belief later in the novel when he suggests that to speak Miguelita’s name “was to possess her in a certain magical way” (272), a statement that corroborates both the generative and ludic functions of language and Hilario’s own role in the novel. He is, to paraphrase Barthes, an entertainer-through-words, who, like any good *bricoleur*, gathers the flotsam and jetsam of history and transforms it into the very matter of myths: “If I tell them,” he schemes, “I arrived

in good time at María Tecún Ridge and saw Aquino the postman in the form of a coyote, howling – that would be my own contribution” (223).

Plainly, Hilario “contributes” facts and admits it. Actually, the entire novel portrays events that are later modified: Honest women are recast as brazen, the dead as immortal, the blind as opossum. Fiction is an illusion and both are a reflection on life and the human condition. As one character astutely observes: “Seeing is believing, the rest is just poetry” (185). Nonetheless, the incontrovertible fact is that man feeds on poetry he hears as much as on the reality he sees. Asturias, like Valéry and a great many of the writers who have reflected on the performance of a speech act – considers “intuition” and “expression,” in Benedetto Croce’s terms, inextricable from each other. For Asturias, language is a mode of creating reality through mere utterance and, most importantly, of producing certain “consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons” (Austin, 101).⁵⁰

For this reason *Hombres de maíz* tells the plight of the Guatemalan Indian but also lays bare the mythmaking function. If Asturias could succeed in sharing the message of hope and renewal portrayed in his novel, if he could succeed in persuading the men and women of Guatemala of the need for a retroactive evolution based on the rehabilitation of ancestral traditions (such as communal sense and loyalty to the land), then he might successfully revolutionize the foundations of the society in which he lived on the basis of sound principles conceived by his Mayan ancestors. Focusing on the tale tellers at the very moment of creation and subsequently presenting their fiction incorporated into the fabric of his own was primordial to his scheme. Above all, exposing the rift between action and telling, between teller and myth, would ensure the reader’s complicity.

Not only are we allowed, therefore, to perceive the evolution of myths and history throughout *Hombres de maíz* but so, too, constantly reminded of the fictional nature of communication by the characters themselves. In chap. XVIII, for example, the sorcerer with black hands significantly qualifies the events leading up to Godoy’s death with a parenthetical remark: “They

condemned him to be burned to death, and *in appearance* the sentence was carried out" (303), and earlier in the novel another character writes in his diary: "*They say* this Nichón turns into a coyote" (my emphasis; 176).

Characters in *Hombres* may well question bits and pieces of a given legend but lack of certainty doesn't hinder events from becoming part of life. In fact, the tale-telling process, the stuff of myth, is shown to be the mother of culture and man, the mythmaker, its father. Human beings create myths that are retold, recast, and remembered until they start to function as part of the collective heritage that we recognize as culture. Asturias's narrative aim shines clear when we pursue this line of thought. If man creates through language, he seems to say, why couldn't he, the writer, formulate along with Arévalo the principles of a new society? Why couldn't he convince his readers that the rehabilitation of the agricultural community of their Mayan ancestors was their only hope for, simultaneously, progress and continuity?

Asturias knew full well that to convince he needed to make an accomplice of the reader. A didactic work whose message is the need for change depends on the willingness of the public and, undoubtedly, the best method to obtain that will was not merely to show the way but to share it. For this reason, choice is offered to the reader throughout the novel. Instead of unwavering facts, *Hombres de maíz* introduces kaleidoscopic events, myths in the process of becoming, protagonists in transition between human and animal personae. The result is a cultural frieze culled in ambiguity and told through many variations portrayed as a series of options that ceaselessly invite our active involvement. For this reason we can say that Asturias's linguistic system opens up the text just as the myth-making process expands the so-called objective (and in this sense limiting) possibilities of the narrative act. As an intertextual network abiding by its own rules, Asturias's first *neo-Indigenista* novel functions as a veritable degree zero in which reader and text are conjoined through language, the creative act, and the open signs of poetic fiction. What is more important, those who become active participants in a creative act whose theme wills the return to the land are only one step removed from influencing

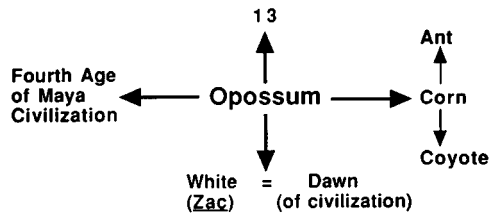


Figure 2.4. The multilateral signifier in *Hombres de maíz*

that return in reality. *Hombres de maíz* is thus a wistful invitation, through language, to participate in the social revolution which its author advocated throughout his life.

A new American idiom

Social change was not all Asturias strove for. How to renew language and, specifically, how to restore its lost imagistic quality were also among his major concerns. In fact, he advanced to Luis Harss that in writing *Hombres de maíz* he was searching for an “American idiom” (Harss and Dohmann, 81). And it wasn’t simply that he wished to revitalize language by “restructuring it from the inside,” as Harss points out (81), but that, to borrow Michael Rifaterre’s term, he chose to express his ideas by “indirection,” to threaten the literary representation of reality by displacing, distorting, or creating new meaning in all his fiction (*Semiotics of Poetry*, 1). A number of well-known *Indigenista* novels of the late teens and thirties – Alcides Arguedas’s *Raza de bronce* (1919) and Jorge Icaza’s *Huasi pungo* (1934) – fully respond to mimetic canons in the explicitness of their prose. But not Asturias’s work. Instead, he defies the standards of fictional form by building his text horizontally in terms of the thematic development as well as vertically on the basis of a network of signs endowed with a multiplicity of meanings. By this I simply mean that in *Hombres de maíz* a given number of Spanish signifiers command a system of associations referring not only to the corresponding Spanish signified but also to one or several elements of Mayan mythology. As shown in Figure 2.4, a word such as “opossum” doesn’t merely suggest a Spanish concept; it also refers to a color, a number, an element, and a historical

epoch all of which are interrelated according to their attributed role in pre-Columbian mythology.

Like Joyce, who composes *Ulysses* on the basis of a complex narrative framework (the "Linati schema") whereby each chapter is linked with a section of the *Odyssey*, an hour of day, an organ of the body, an art, a color, and a symbol, Asturias builds his new "American idiom" on the basis of layered relationships embracing natural elements, animals, colors, and numbers – all interlinked (Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 519, 521). What emerges as the plot of *Hombres* is not one that develops chronologically or "ethically" – through its characters – but associatively, through polyvalent signs that interlock to form the infrastructure of the text.

Many critics have discussed the "poetic nature" of Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* fiction, specifically referring to his use of alliteration, onomatopoeia, and repetition, but most have neglected to point out his greatest contribution to poetic prose. If we accept Roman Jakobson's persuasive argument that the novel is organized syntagmatically and the poem metaphorically, we can readily understand the structural principle of Asturias's poetic prose and grasp the manner in which character continuity and chronology are overshadowed in these texts (*Questions de poétique*, 117).

Hombres de maíz is narrated like a poem by means of metaphors articulated in an infinity of couplings and connections. For this reason, and borrowing Saussure's term, we can say that this novel is paragrammatic or, in other words, that it absorbs and contains a multiplicity of texts.⁵¹ It is true that on a purely thematic level it can be read as one semantic unit structurally conceived as a double proposition: (1) exploitation of the soil/retribution and (2) hero's quest/return to the land. But from the standpoint of meaning the text is a string of successive information units anchored, as we have seen, on a functional triad.

To understand the author's enigmatic narrative principle, the reader must pay particular attention to the beginning and ending of his ode in praise of origins and tradition. *Hombres de maíz* opens with the tale of Gaspar Ilóm, an Indian rebel who fights to restore the time-honored Mayan practice of planting corn for need and not for profit. As we have seen, his men are

massacred and the corn growers take over the land. In later sections Goyo Yic and Nicho Aquino embark on a search that, for all intents and purposes, is a quest for identity.

Mirroring reality, the Indian in Asturias's novel has been forced to accept a dominant culture, alien to his beliefs, while being simultaneously coerced into suppressing his own convictions in order to become integrated into a society whose values he rejects on principle. If the culture that traditionally defines him is to survive, he must reject the Hispanic superstructure. However, after almost five centuries of colonial rule his sense of identification is such that rejecting the dominant image implies negating at least part of himself. Rather than forsake the foreign culture, the Indian forgets the traditions of his ancestors; perpetually alienated, he becomes a pariah entangled in a destructive cycle that defaces his identity and destroys his sense of individuality.⁵²

To dramatize this alienation and enhance the sense of duality that constitutes each individual, the Indian protagonists of *Hombres de maíz* are set apart from their spouses and portrayed as having a dual nature composed of human and animal incarnations. Jacques Lacan would say that their "image on the mirror" is seen as extraneous to themselves. In fact, alienation in *Hombres* corresponds step by step to what Lacan defines as "the mirror stage" to describe the relationship of the developing organism to his reality or, in his own words, of the *Innenwelt* to the *Umwelt* ("Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction de Je" [*Ecrits*, 96]). The whole of this development is perceived as a temporal dialectic during which individuals evolve from having "une image morcelée du corps à une forme . . . orthopedique de sa totalité"; or, in other words, from splitness to unity (*Ecrits*, 97).

At the conclusion of *Hombres de maíz*, Goyo Yic, no longer blind (both factually and metaphorically), is reunited with his missing María and symbolically transformed along with "old folk, young folk, men and women" into an ant "to carry home the maize" (329). All's well that ends well, although this final kinship of man and animal signals only a beginning. Man – his imago in the epilogue corroborates it – is about to start civilization anew.

The role of animals

It is particularly significant that the blind protagonist of Asturias's novel becomes an ant in the epilogue because this insect is traditionally portrayed as one of the discoverers of corn in Mesoamerica. In a myth quoted by Eric Thompson in *Maya History and Religion*, Quetzalcoatl asks the ant where it obtained the maize it was carrying. The ant does not answer at first, "but finally indicated as the place the Cerro de Tonacateptl (Maize Mountain)" (348). Furthermore and of even greater importance to the thematic development of *Hombres de maíz* is the fact that in this same myth the civilizing god, Quetzalcoatl, turns "himself into a black ant and [accompanies] the red ant to the deposit beneath the mountain, and, taking some grains, he carried it to the other gods" (348). In addition, we know from the *Popol Vuh* that corn "became human fat . . . the flesh . . . for our first fathers" (164). Reading the two myths in unison we see how, by finding corn, the ant is shown to be implicitly responsible for the creation of the men of maize. It is quite clear, then, that by transforming his protagonist Goyo Yic into this insect, Asturias was designating his philoprogenitive and godlike role as well as the birth of a new race of men, for, by harvesting the sacred grain, Goyo and his family are producing the very element of creation.⁵³ The last metamorphosis in the novel is merely a confirmation of Goyo's generative function more explicitly delineated by his *nahual*, the opossum.⁵⁴

In Maya, the name of this marsupial is *Zac Och*, which literally means "white opossum."⁵⁵ The importance of this animal in South American mythology cannot be overemphasized. In an Apinayé myth quoted by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Le Cru et le cuit*, the female opossum discovers the maize plant and teaches man to prepare its grain.⁵⁶ Lévi-Strauss contrasts cultivated plants with uncultivated foods such as mushrooms and rotten wood used as sustenance by prehorticultural man and concludes that by introducing the maize plant, the opossum becomes the instrument "whereby man may obtain agriculture" (165).

This role of the opossum in the Apinayé myth is comparable to that of Goyo Yic in some very significant respects. In *Hombres*

de maíz Goyo and his family return to Pisigüilito to harvest corn. But they return only after the land of Ilóm has been rid of the men who exploit the sacred grain and in so doing defy the most sacred tenet of Mayan life. According to the *Popol Vuh*, man is made of maize, and for this reason, as one character argues in Asturias's novel, "we can't make a business out of what we're made of, out of what our flesh is . . . everything will end up impoverished and scorched by the sun, by the air, by the clearing fires, if we keep sowing maize to make a business of it, as though it weren't sacred, highly sacred" (204). *Hombres de maíz* tells the story of the men who defile the sacred order and of the man who reinstates it. In other words, it is in every way a tale of the return to the traditional communal values of the Maya rooted in the monoculture of the grain that Goyo harvests according to age-old principles. This is why he is explicitly likened both to the animal that, according to the South American mythic tradition, introduces cultivated plants, as well as to the Mayan peasant of the patriarchal agricultural society of the Fourth Age that Asturias presents as an ideal for his people.

As an emblem of race and culture the choice of the opossum was capital to Asturias's scheme. Because this animal is one of the givers of maize in New World myths, its life-giving ability, like Goyo's in the novel, is limitless and gynogenetic rather than phallic. For example, the Creek and the Cherokee of North America believed that the female of the species engenders without participation from the male, and in *Hombres de maíz* the wellhead of a new breed of men transforms itself into a "female opossum with a pouch in front of her to carry the babies in" (130). Against the vaporization of life that characterizes the enemies of Ilóm, the opossum's unflagging fecundity stands as an inexhaustible spring, a beacon ensuring the perpetuation of the corn men.

It is evident that the power to regenerate is fully in keeping with the opossum's traditional role as provider of corn and originator of ethnic groups, languages, and customs, and it is a power that undoubtedly stems from the animal's actual behavior (cf. Lévi-Strauss, *Du Miel aux cendres*, 73). As Huxley points out in *Affable Savages*, the opossum plays dead whenever it feels threatened (195); in the natives' eyes, therefore, it is capable of resuscitating. In addition, the pouch of *Didelphis virginiana* sug-

gests to the viewer the ability to generate life, like the legendary phoenix, out of its own body.

To underscore further Goyo-Opossum's fecundity, Asturias links "seeing" with "begetting" and starts by making Goyo blind, "a man who had remained a child . . . lost, without eyes" (104). The blind Goyo is fully dependent on his wife and unable to live from the most formative and traditional task in Mayaland: planting corn. However, once he decides to embark on a search that will lead him back to María Tecún, to the reestablishment of communal life and of an agricultural society, his eyesight is restored by a medicine man, Chigüichón Culebro. At this point in the novel the reader is informed that while he was blind, Goyo "had never attained the maternity of touching things" (123), a statement that proclaims his ability to procreate by equating the life-giving gift with the eyesight he has just acquired. The medicine man removes the wool of blindness from Goyo's eyes ("unstitching the film from a blind man's eyes" [121]) and with it begins to weave the fabric of the patriarchal society that María the mother has carded close to her bosom. She is responsible for the cultural evolution dramatized in the novel (from matriarchy to patriarchy, from the Third Age to the Fourth) because her departure severs the cord of dependency by forcing Goyo into the world; in other words, she opens his eyes in more ways than one.

The blind man's tortuous path to knowledge takes him across land and over water to the very bowels of the sea-surrounded earth in the Castillo del Puerto where he is imprisoned for illegal traffic in liquor. Meanwhile, before he can emerge triumphant in the epilogue, another character, Nicho-Coyote, is given free rein to wag its tail, and he wags it, as in every other tale in the novel, for a very good reason. Mythic monads in Mayaland come in threes, ant and opossum are not exclusively regarded as discoverers of corn, and Goyo's absence is not merely used, as many argue, to make the tale grow longer.

In the Mopan, Kekchi, and Pokomchi myth of the discovery of corn, it is the fox who "found and tasted some grains of maize dropped by the ants as they carried them off" and later in the tale this same animal introduces corn, albeit unwillingly, to the others.⁵⁷ The fox-coyote and the ant are thus generally paired off in their association with the discovery of corn in

Mesoamerican mythology and both animals are transposed to Asturias's novel without losing in any manner the role that traditional folklore assigns to them⁵⁸ (i.e., opossum and coyote are one of the creator couples in the *Popol Vuh*).

In addition, according to Raphaël Girard, the coyote's death in the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* corresponds to the titular evolution in the *Popol Vuh* whereby Wak-Hunahpu (sun-sparrow hawk) supersedes Hunahpu-Utiu (sun-coyote).⁵⁹ Girard sees a parallel between this change in nomenclature and the cultural evolution that the popular tale symbolizes in the Quiché epic: "However, the sparrow-hawk killed the coyote," he writes, "that is to say, the symbol of prehistory is superseded by the symbol of Maya-Quiché culture" (*Le Popol Vuh*, 275–276).

That Hunahpu-Utiu is the symbol of the prehistoric cycle and that its death announces the beginning of Maya-Quiché culture explains not only the transition between Nicho-Coyote and Goyo-Opossum but also one of the key features of narrative development in *Hombres de maíz*. Characters in this novel are obviously emblematic of historical epochs: Nicho-Coyote of prehistory, Goyo-Opossum of the Fourth Age, the dawn of Maya-Quiché civilization.⁶⁰ The protagonists of *Hombres de maíz* substitute for one another in a paradigmatic chain; as we have indicated, there isn't one, single hero of the novel but rather a collective beneficiary – the men of maize – who will profit and presumably prosper from the teachings in the novel.

On the basis of the role played by the opossum, coyote, and ant in the discovery of maize, Asturias gives his triadic system based on fire, water, and corn the first of three pivotal points. The two remaining elements, fire and water, dictate of themselves the structural pattern to be followed in the rest of the novel. *Hombres de maíz* grows along nine symbolic avenues (three sets of three animals each) that interweave in an untramed path toward synthesis. No system could better lend itself to Asturias's purpose. Three stood as the logical figure to represent both dialogue and struggle, on the one hand, and resulting change and resolution, on the other. A single voice would resolve the standing argument of two, bring together and heal the wounds left by fugitive heroes, divided cultures, and split self-images.

To balance the equilibrium of the corn triad, the deer, the dog, and the firefly, on one side, and the fish, the snake, and

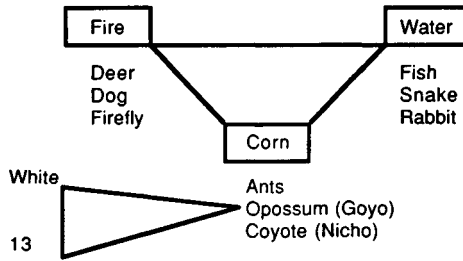


Figure 2.5. Pyramidal structure of *Hombres de maíz*

the rabbit, on the other, negotiate their way, through land, sea, and air, into the pages of *Hombres de maíz*. The three thematic pinions of Asturias's novel immediately suggest a triangular or pyramidal structure. But we must keep in mind that each animal in the series of nine is associated with a color and a number, making the overall narrative design much more complex than the basic tripartite system in Figure 2.5 seems to imply. If Figure 2.5 were to portray the link between each animal and its corresponding number and color, there would be nine triangles clustered around the central nucleus in which fire, water, and corn are yoked together.

The overall development of *Hombres de maíz* is articulated by means of associations that bring together both the characters and the story lines while allowing the plot to move forward in a coherent manner. Actually, the notion of "moving forward" fails to express Asturias's innovation. In his 1949 saga the author rethinks and recasts the rules of chronological development. The action *does* move forward in time (Goyo finds María, his children grow up, etc.), but it also makes headway in terms of thematic associations. Furthermore, it forges ahead while also harking back. The myths of the ancient Maya are brought into the lives of their modern heirs; this means that Asturias joins the tail ends of (the normally linear) historical time into a circle. In other words, the events of Hunahpu's life are likened to those of Gaspar Ilóm's, for example. The author of *Hombres de maíz* actualizes the past in the present and demonstrates that culture is a continuum that cannot be severed, even by historical upheavals. This is the culmination of all he had learned with Raynaud and Capitan and, at the same time, the projection of his highest aims: to demonstrate that the past had

validity, that Indian culture was worthy of recognition and had to be incorporated into the daily life of Guatemala.

The relationships between animals and spheres of action in Figure 2.5 are all based on American mythology, on myths from different geographic regions, which, as Lévi-Strauss argues, inform "major" cultural traditions such as the Maya. For instance, on the Latin American continent the traditional masters of fire were the deer and the jaguar, a rather unlikely pair until we learn that among the Menomini of North America "deer were once man-eating jaguars." In addition, "heroes, having been changed into deer, became capable of playing the part of either the victim or the killer" (Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit*, 139). This duality filters into *Hombres de maíz* as well: The deer of the Seventh Fire, which is the firefly wizard in disguise, lets itself be killed so that from his body can come forth the tool of vengeance ("The Deer of the Seventh Fire lay buried deep in the earth, but its blood of red citrus juice bathed the moon" [67]). The deer's inherent duality carries over to its association with fire.⁶¹ When restricted, the fire this animal provides is beneficial to man, but dispensed excessively, the element becomes a curse to humanity. The Mayan expression *cim-cehil*, "when the deer die," is a set phrase to indicate drought, and excessive fire turns out to be the weapon used by the deer against the enemies of Ilóm (Scholes and Roys, 122).

In "History of the Maya Area," F. V. Scholes and R. L. Roys translate Ah Ceh as "hunter," "archer," or "the principal male deer," and they identify it with Zip, the god of the chase (180). According to another source, there is a nexus between Zip, god of hunting, and Ix Tab, goddess of suicides, which would explain the immolation of the deer in chap. VII of Asturias's novel. However, in *Hombres de maíz* death is not a finality but, rather, a transitional step within the evolutionary cycle. The dead deer comes back to life, and in his incarnation as firefly wizard, leads Nicho through the caves. Both the stag and the firefly are fused into one as dispenser of the curse and adjuvant of the men of maize. Furthermore, the firefly's behavior in Asturias's novel is analogous to its function in the *Popol Vuh*, where it is the ally of Hunahpu and Xbalanque.⁶²

Asturias was faithful to Mesoamerican mythic models in all details, no matter how seemingly insignificant. This is nowhere

more evident than in his characterization of Jasmine, Aquino-Coyote's dog. According to Gilmore, the coyote and dog are often paired off in Mayan lore: the former provides man with corn, the latter bestows fire (377–378). For this reason the dog is frequently portrayed in Mayan codices carrying a torch. Furthermore, according to Thompson, the dog is associated with night and, like Jasmine, has access to the underworld (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 79). Since Nicho is paired with Hunahpu the sun, his dog's behavior answers to the pattern set down in the Mayan epic. In fact, one of the dog's names, Ah ocencab, means "he who descends and enters the earth" to lead the solar deity through the perilous underground journey, which is night in Mayan thought, and the path to enlightenment in *Hombres de maíz* (79).

On the basis of his kinship with the dog and opossum as respective emblems of fire and corn, the man of maize in Asturias's novel begins to take shape. Only one element was still missing from the symbolic alchemy. If Asturias was to abide by the narrative structure that he had thus far imposed on himself, it would mean that three characters in the novel would be somehow transformed or associated with animal emblems of the water sign. No one could deny, however, that the self-imposed demands of a pyramid of three sets of three animals was a considerable undertaking, demanding variety of design and conception above all. Nine major characters each with their respective *nahuales* would have added little but confusion to Asturias's design and weakened the impact of the more crucial transformations as well as of the final synthesis.

Asturias had begun to build meaning on the basis of a tripartite structure and he would remain consistent to the end. But instead of having each animal be a stand-in for a human protagonist in the novel, he conceives a category of adjuvants to the hero that includes, once again, three types. He begins by devising characters who explicitly transform themselves into animals (e.g., Nicho-Coyote or the sorcerer-deer of the Seventh Fire). Second, he portrays animals that do not have a symbolic link with human nature (such as Jasmine); and finally, animals that are either metaphorically associated or simply paired off with characters for thematic reasons (e.g., Gaspar Ilóm and the serpent).

The water element, more than any other, exemplifies the pairing system of the third type. For example, Gaspar is both likened to the fish and metaphorically assimilated to the serpent. To understand the reason for both associations, the reader of *Hombres de maíz* has first to grasp the inevitability of Gaspar's sacrifice and its catalyzing function in the novel.

On a first reading, the "serpent of six hundred thousand coils of mud, moon, forests, rainstorms, mountains, birds, and echoes" that winds itself around Gaspar's body can hardly be described as an adjuvant to the hero (1). Not, at least, until we sense the association between the reptile and the accusing soil of Ilóm. The snake is significantly assembled from bits and pieces of nature as a microcosmic emblem of all that lives; it binds Gaspar to the land and compels him to defend it. In Mayaland, the chief of a community is assimilated to the head of a serpent whose body represents the communal entity. *Hor chan* in Chorti literally means "serpent's head" (but also Chief of the Chan), and *Chan* is the generic name the Maya give themselves (Raphaël Girard, 235, 271). In this manner, the people of Mesoamerica are assimilated to the reptile from which, in their minds, they are all descendants. "The sky Chicchans, in Chorti belief, are four giant snakes (*Chan* is 'snake' in Chorti) each of which dwells at the bottom of a large body of water" and the Chacs, which Thompson equates with the Chicchans, were also represented as having a human or part human head with an ophidian's body (*Maya History and Religion*, 262). The Chacs were rain gods, a belief that explains the nexus between the reptile and water and, correspondingly, between this element and Gaspar Ilóm. Gaspar is renewed by jumping into the river and, like all Indians in the novel, has "rainwater eyes" (*Hombres de maíz*, 6). In addition, his link with this element is strengthened when he is "swallowed by a toothless half moon which sucked him from the air, without biting him, like a small fish" (3), an analogy that links him with Hunahpu, who, as we have seen, reincarnates as a "fish man" when his bones are cast into the river in the *Popol Vuh* (part III, 149).

According to the anthropologist Raphaël Girard, "the fish represents the maize god during his journey through the underworld" (199). Thompson confirms this statement by suggesting that the *Imix* prefix and the fish, wherever incorpo-

rated into a glyph, “probably record that Venus as morning star has just emerged from the underworld” (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 219). The fish and the Imix prefix are “primarily symbols of the earth crocodile, and second, attributes of all deities of the soil and the underworld” (219). Simultaneously deity of the soil and apex of the cosmos, Hunahpu travels nightly through the underworld to emerge at dawn, renewed. His voyage, death, and rebirth through water – like Gaspar’s – evoke the process of germination of the corn kernel, which both epic heroes represent.⁶³

Water is portrayed as a generative element for the men of maize and through one animal, the rabbit, used as an instrument of revenge against their enemies. In both the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* and the *Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, this animal is linked with drought: “There are rains of little profit, rains from a rabbit (*T’ul*) sky” (Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, 154). Thompson notes that drought occurs “because maize or beans have been exchanged for liquor” (*Maya History and Religion*, 285). “It is sinful,” he explains, “to exchange one’s maize, one’s life for *trago*.” In the same manner, in *Hombres de maíz* the corn growers are punished because they “keep sowing maize to make a business of it” (204). Because of their sacrilege, the land burns and even water is likened to fire: “The water catches and burns everything” (my translation [100]).⁶⁴ Only the men of maize who respect the traditional value of corn are protected by the sorcerers who are “the rabbits with maize-leaf ears” (303). Naturally, in defending the grain the rabbit sorcerers are protecting their own flesh, since “the ears of the yellow rabbits are the ears of corn wrapped round the cobs in bundles” (45).⁶⁵

The rabbit encompasses the three key elements that orchestrate the mythic infrastructure of the novel: fire (which it dispenses as punishment), water (which it can withhold according to Mayan belief), and corn (which it embodies). Like water itself (withheld or dispensed), the animal functions as a sign of growth or an agent of destruction and, correspondingly, has power over life and death:

like the other firefly wizards, who took the first machete blows as they slept, with no time to turn back into rabbits. That is what they were,

rabbits, rabbits with maize-leaf ears. They were cut to pieces, but the pieces joined together again, the piece of each wizard which had stayed alive wriggled off to form one single wizard, a wizard made of the bleeding pieces of wizards, and with one voice, from the mouth of that strange being with many arms, many tongues, they launched the curses: Tomás Machojón and Vaca Manuela Machojón burned to death! Fire of the seventh fire will kill Colonel Gonzalo Godoy! (303)

In the *Popol Vuh*, the rabbit lures the Lords of Xibalba away from the ball game so that Xbalanque can rescue its twin's head and reunite it with his body (part III, 147). In Asturias's novel, the rabbit hops to the rescue once again making certain that with its help, the men of maize shall have at long last a durable taste of immortality.

But hopping rabbits and blind opossums were not enough. In the wake of the collective optimism that sweeps across Guatemala starting in 1945 Asturias was determined to give credence to Huxley's logo: "Nothing short of everything will really do" (*Island*, 262). Meaning in his novel would issue from man's nexus with animals, but this was only one component. The cosmos and all meaningful systems – the colors of nature, the numbers of Mesoamerican ritual – join hands in the all-embracing fugue that was to become *Hombres de maíz*.

Numbers

Almost every aspect of Mayan life takes the significance of numbers into account. Numbers were a primordial ingredient in Mesoamerican religious ritual and thus incorporated into the names of many gods. According to Thompson, "thirteen, nine, seven, and four have great ritualistic and divinatory importance in both Maya and Aztec cultures" and they are generally "kindly disposed toward man" (*Rise and Fall*, 261, 175). Not surprisingly, these are the same digits that Asturias uses in his novel as emblems of behavior patterns.

No element in Mayan cosmogony is univocal, however. For this reason, and taking to heart Ezra Pound's maxim that "great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree," Asturias endows the building blocks of his narrative architecture with several connotations. His new American idiom would reflect the evolutionary layout of

Mayan number scales, which portray in their progression from smaller to larger integers the shift from chaos and darkness to deliverance and light. In fact, the sum and substance of the numeral semantics of *Hombres de maíz* is intelligible only in the light of Mayan historical evolution symbolically translated as the transition from seven to thirteen.

In Asturias's novel, seven is the emblem of doom. The soldiers who slaughter Gaspar Ilóm and his men are sentenced to die exactly seven years after the massacre and the avenging animal wizards who carry out the curse are the deer of the Seventh Fire.

In *Maya History and Religion* Thompson discusses a jaguar god whose glyph is represented with number seven on its cheek. This deity is "god of the day Akbal, seventh in the series of days" (227–228).⁶⁶ Elsewhere, Raphaël Girard affirms that the god Seven is an agrarian deity and he refers to the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* to affirm, "Descending from heaven, the god of number Seven becomes a terrestrial god and is associated with the divinity of the soil in order to create corn" (*Le Popol Vuh*, 143). In *Hombres de maíz*, the wizards, who happen to fulfill a heavenly role (they are "[those] who sow seeds of light in the black air of the night," 291), are simultaneously present on earth in the role of deer, masters of fire. The plurality of representation of number seven in Mayan lore, linking the digit to both the jaguar and the deer and portraying it as both a heavenly divinity and an earthly one, is duplicated in Asturias's novel where the wizards fulfill the celestial and telluric functions of the sacred Mayan stag. Number seven is likewise associated with those who deal out the punishment (the sorcerer-deer of the seventh fire and Gaspar) and those who are exterminated as a result of the curse: "Fire of the seventh fire will kill Colonel Gonzalo Godoy" and the Machojones (303).

Asturias chooses this number after carefully researching its many connotations. In various Maya languages, *Akbal*, the seventh day, means "night" or "darkness" (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 293). For this reason, in *Hombres de maíz* seven ("darkness," the age of the jaguar-deer) is opposed to thirteen ("daylight," the dawn associated with the opossum in Mayan mythology) and the transition from one to the other (through

the sum of the equally meaningful four and nine) announces the passage from night to day and into the civilized era of the men of maize.

Thirteen, the symbolic unit toward which the thematic flow of *Hombres de maíz* evolves, is at least as important as the sum of its components four and nine. In fact, four is the symbolic foundation of culture in Mayan thought. The Maya believed that there were four world directions, each associated with a color. They also thought that the sky was held in place by four gods, the Bacabs, who stood on the four sides of the universe. In addition, each god "was not only one but four individuals, separately assigned to the colour directions" (Coe, 67).

Within the realm of everyday life this digit was equally important to the Mayan peasant. Four are the sides of a cornfield, and in the *Popol Vuh* the forefathers of the men of maize were also four ("our first fathers, the four human works" [164]). In *Hombres de maíz* the number four is systematically paired off with nine and associated with Goyo Yic, Nicho Aquino, and "those who descend to the underground caves" in chap. XVIII to discover their origins:

For nine days they endure this voluntary but maddening abandonment . . . and they accuse themselves aloud of being made of mud. . . . For four long days they go on with these clumsy gestures. . . . The firefly wizards come to their aid. They announce that they are not men of clay, that those sad men of crumbling mud were all destroyed. In the night of deep aromas they wait for the sun. (298-300)

A last trial awaits them:

Four days they spend in [an] aerial plain. . . . Four days and nights without sleep. . . . On the fourth day, as the sun turns to the west, the wizards announce that they are not men of wood . . . and they grant them passage to the flatlands, where the maize in all its forms awaits them, in the flesh of their children who are made of maize. (301)

Asturias condenses the Mayan tale of creation in a few pages of chap. XVIII and compels us to turn to the unabridged original in order to grasp the full import of his novel. After the men of mud and the wooden puppets are destroyed in the *Popol Vuh*, genesis comes to a standstill. Before the men of maize can come into being, four chronicles in which villains are defeated by

heroes are ushered in (Seven Macaw, Hurricane, Earthquake, and the Lords of Xibalba lose out to Hunahpu and Xbalanque). The creation myth is suspended at the conclusion of part I, 84, because corn has not come into existence at this time. Hunahpu and Xbalanque's tale makes possible the completion of the "human works" because their life story is clearly an allegory of the birth of the sacred grain. As Sun and Moon enthroned in heaven, the twins promote the growth of maize in their manifestations as light and water while simultaneously, in their agrarian incarnation, they are the living embodiment of the corn kernel.

Before maize comes into being, however, Sun must travel through the empire of shadows and appear renewed as the symbol and giver of life. As a divinity of day the solar deity was represented by number four and in addition, since "he was one of the nine lords of the night and the underworld," he was patron of number nine. Because Sun alternately embodies both numbers, the pair enters into Asturias's scheme as an indissoluble unit. Goyo the blind man gets up from his eye operation "on the ninth day" but is forced to spend "four days and nights . . . in the dark, until the thirteenth day" (122). In the same manner, Nicho, accompanied by the firefly wizard, spends "that long night of nine days of darkness and . . . four long days" before being ushered into the light (299). After their respective trials, Goyo is given sight; Nicho, understanding. Their enlightenment, on the thirteenth day, ushers in the reparation of the dislocated world described throughout Asturias's novel.

According to Thompson, in Mayan mythology a group of thirteen gods symbolizes the sky and, correspondingly, the light of day. The Maya translated the antagonism between the "thirteen sky gods and the nine divinities of the underworld in symbolic terms as a dialectic between darkness and light" (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 10). In their eyes, "the sky, its powers, and its personifications stand for goodness and light which inspire confidence and right doing," whereas "the underworld, with its associations with death, upholds the powers of evil" (*Maya History and Religion*, 195). Clearly, then, the translation from nine to thirteen in Asturias's novel symbolically suggests the

transition from the backward darkness, emblematic of the Third Age, to the enlightenment of the agricultural Fourth Age described in the epilogue.

As Hunahpu travels through shadows before sallying forth empowered to nourish the growth and embody the kernel of maize (and thus directly beget the first suitable human beings), Goyo and Nicho spend nine days in darkness and four in the twilight before emerging transformed (opossum as seer, coyote as coupler). In the last chapter of the novel, Nicho brings Goyo and María together, and their return to Pisigüilito to harvest corn actualizes the cultural message of Asturias's novel: Maize and man are one; regard for the former entails respect of self and the possibility of rebuilding Mayaland on new terms. The birth of the patriarchal agricultural society described in the epilogue takes place only after a long journey through night (likened to Hunahpu's in Xibalba) and blindness (represented by Goyo's) emblematic of the social exploitation endemic to Guatemala.

In 1945, President Juan José Arévalo promised his country "a period of sympathy for the man who works in the fields," a well-deserved respite from the decades of bloodshed and exploitation brought on by the rule of the many dictators that had all but consumed the country (Dion, 116). His spokesman through literature, Miguel Angel Asturias, translated this evolution into a two-part frieze portraying the past as a picture of social havoc and the future as a stable agricultural community supervised by the watchful eye of the corn-growing father, Goyo Yic, and prospering under the sign thirteen, emblem of daylight.

Colors

After digits and animals become the girders and stays of Asturias's construction, four colors are chosen to cast the final dye unto his multilayered composition. The yellow of the southerly direction, the black of the west, the red of the east, and the white of the north rainbow the pages of *Hombres de maíz*.⁶⁷

Yellow, the first color to be mentioned in the novel, is traditionally associated with the south, "a region of death and misfortune" (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 216). For this

reason, as Thompson indicates, "yellow flowers are used to decorate graves, and in the Guatemalan highlands mourners painted their bodies yellow" (304). This would explain why in *Hombres de maíz* the rabbit-wizards who lay a curse of sterility and death on the Ilóm murderers are yellow, why when the idea of slaying Gaspar enters Godoy's head, "the afternoon turned deep yellow" (13), why Candelaria Reinoso, who mourns the mysterious disappearance of Machojón, is "dressed almost always in yellow" (258),⁶⁸ and why this is the color of the flowers that Nicho Aquino passes on his way to the caves: "Hundreds, thousands, millions of tiny plumes of illusion could be seen waving in the soft breath of the wind, lit up by the sun, and the spots of big yellow daisies with black hearts enlivened their gaze wherever it came to rest" (305).

Nicho, the character who enters the caves in *Hombres de maíz*, will be the recipient of knowledge but, as we have seen, not its beneficiary. The death of his wife is revealed to him but also the arcane mysteries of Mayan tradition. Once Nicho is enlightened, he brings Goyo and María together in keeping with his function as intermediary. It is Goyo-Opossum, who after spending three years and seven months "buried within walls five to six arm's lengths thick" in the Castillo del Puerto, emerges victorious, like Hunahpu himself, and returns with María to tend the soil (315).

The fact that Goyo – the personification of the men of maize – is the beneficiary of the action in the novel does not mean that Nicho should be seen as a victim paying for cultural sins he has not committed (i.e., using corn for commercial purposes). In an allegorical tale all characters are vehicles used to portray a message, and Nicho's function is to discover and relate the most basic tenet of Maya-Quiché culture: that man and maize are one. Asturias names him Aquino, as we have seen, because Ah Kin is the Yucatec title given to the priest in charge of Mayan learning and ritual; for the same reason, he links him with the color black, emblem of the underworld and "the way of the Lord."⁶⁹

Nicho is led on his quest by an old wizard whose hands "were black, as though he had been cleaning out the oven or were a dyer by trade" (201), and Jasmine, his mongrel, has "black spots on its front paws" (197), like the dog who

conducted the deceased to the land of the dead according to Mexican belief.⁷⁹ In pre-Columbian codices Sun himself dons this color to represent his trip to the underworld but like Nicho – and this is a crucial point of Asturias's novel – he is capable of reemerging from the kingdom of the dead to transmit his message of life. The ones who do not escape are the enemies of Ilóm. Their defeat and destruction, told in the first nine chapters of the novel, are symbolically dramatized through the color red and, by extension, brought forth through images of blood, fire, and war.

In chap. VIII, when Colonel Godoy and his troops arrive at the "Earthshaker" at the end of the seven-year period, the color of the moon foreshadows their own doom: "The red-hot moon glowed like a live coal" and later, "the smoke of the fires stains everything like you was seeing blood . . . and it's as if they were waging war on the moon and there were lots of dead and wounded" (74–75). Central American mythology provides the basis for the syntagmatic chain linking together fire, blood, and the color of flames. In Mesoamerica, Xipe "is the red god, the god of sacrifice" (Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 224). For this reason, red is frequently associated with bloodshed and death in this area. But this is only one way of approaching the complex cluster that Asturias develops as the semantic field for this color.

Chac, the Yucatec word for red, is a homonym of the rain god in the Mayan area. When the time comes to carry out the seven-year prophecy and punish Godoy's troops for the Ilóm massacre, the antithetical elements fire and water are brought together under the aegis of a single polyvalent sign, simultaneously the color of Xipe, metonymically substituted for fire, and appellative of the rain deities: "The stink, however, was by now fire in the air, clearing fires, burning forest. . . . It's raining in the Earthshaker . . . God forbid there's a fire beneath the water, the water will catch and everything will burn" (99 – 100).

Naturally, water does catch fire and most of Godoy's men burn in the trap. Asturias brings together the counteracting elements in an echo of the Mayan genesis in which sun and moon, emblematic of fire and water, join hands in the creation of the men of maize. It is only logical, after all, that the destruction of the enemies of the corn men should be brought about

through the very forces which, to the Indian, signify life. In fact, the color red, which both Girard and Thompson see as emblematic of the Maya-Quiché Fourth Age, functions as a transitional sign distinguishing the era of the enemies of corn from that of the corn men and for this reason, the color changes its connotation in the second part of Asturias's novel (chaps. X–XIX).⁷¹

That red signals evolution and change in *Hombres de maíz* is confirmed in Nicho's cave episode (chap. XVIII). On his way to the underworld, the mailman sits down "on a crag the color of fire" and soon after paints his body with red and black chalk he finds scattered on the ground (287). *Annatto*, a red coloring from the fruit of *Bixa orellana*, is one of the ritual body colors used in Mesoamerican ceremonies and fundamental to the Ah Kin's ritual makeup. Soon after they enter the caves, his companion, the black-handed wizard, explains the origin of the seven-year curse as well as the sacred bond between man and maize disrupted by those who exploit the grain for commercial purposes:

Just as though men made their women pregnant to sell the flesh of their children, to trade the life of their flesh with the blood of their blood, that's what the maize growers are like who sow, not to sustain themselves and support their families, but covetously, to make rich men of themselves. (326–327)

Resolution follows enlightenment. In the last chapter of the novel, Nicho the mailman delivers for the last time. Goyo and María are brought together as Nicho fades, his function fulfilled. Just as this character carries out his mission and disappears to make way for Goyo, the red of initiation recoils in the wake of white, emblem of civilization.

In the notes to his Spanish edition of the *Popol Vuh*, Asturias translates Zac as "white, whiteness, light, dawn of day, and dawn (beginning of something and more especially of civilization)" (*Los dioses, los héroes*, 155).⁷² How fitting, then, that the precursors of this new race should be Opossum, the white animal, and his runaway "*tecuna*," who, as it turns out, is no other than María Zacatón: "She was not María Tecún, that no-good, but María Zacatón."⁷³ He named her with the name Tecún because it was the Tecunes who cut off the heads of all the Zacatones" (118).

Read "horizontally," in terms of the thematic development, *Hombres de maíz* tells the tale of many ostensibly unrelated characters, of the struggle between Indians and corn growers, of the woes of a beggar in search of his wife. To some, these narrative threads may well be read as an "anthology of short stories," but actually, they are all articulated as a series of interconnected metaphors (Menton, *Historia crítica*, 222). As we can see from Table 2.2, Asturias's message translates the evolution from chaos to stability as a transition from the number seven to the number thirteen, from the color yellow to the color white, and from a period recalling the Mayan Third Age to one distinctly evoking the Fourth – the era of highest achievement for this culture.

As in the *Popol Vuh*, each character in *Hombres de maíz* fulfills his narrative mission and leaves a legacy to the characters that follow. Gaspar defends the soil and dies for it. Goyo, the prototype of the estranged peasant, has grown blind to the values of his Mayan ancestors and must be brought back to health. He searches and finds all that his people have lost: family, community, land, and the eyes to see them. The curse of the yellow-eared rabbit sorcerers ultimately destroys the men who exploit the maize that goes "into the flesh of created man." Once they are gone, Goyo is taught to see and the reader to listen. Asturias's didactic message harkens the agrarian reform that President Arévalo was at that very time preparing for his people; it is in every way a canticle of hope announcing a new era for the men of maize:

Poppa-Possum Goyo Yic and María Tecún went back to Pisigüilito. . . . Drive in the uprights again and build a bigger rancho, because their married children had many children and they all went there to live with them. . . . Old folk, men and women, they all became ants after the harvest, to carry home the maize. (329)

In the *Popol Vuh*, the tale of the cultural heroes Hunahpu and Xbalanque reaches both its climax and its conclusion when they are enthroned in heaven, one as sun, the other as moon.⁷⁴ Faithful to his model to the end, Asturias's earthly garden portrayed in the epilogue of *Hombres de maíz* must be read as an apotheosis equivalent to that of the Mayan genesis: a promised land in which chaos, the deer, the number seven, and the color

Table 2.2

	I Gaspar Ilóm	II Machojón	III Deer of the Seventh Fire	IV Colonel Chalo Godoy	V Goyo Yic	VI Coyote- Mailman	+ Epilogue
Animals	Fish Snake Rabbits	Fireflies	Deer		Opossum	Coyote Dog	Ants
Colors	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow Red	White	Yellow Black Red	White
Numbers Elements	7 Water	7 Fire	7 Fire	7 Fire	9 + 4 Water	9 + 4 Fire and water	13 Corn
Historical epochs					Third Age	—————→	Fourth Age

yellow have made way for stability, the opossum, the number thirteen, and the color white. Hunahpu the creator has fused with Goyo the father, both producing, by intercourse of contraries, life from death, light from darkness, order from chaos, and, most of all, art from dialectic. In the epilogue the Fourth Age, pinnacle of Maya-Quiché civilization, is about to start anew. Asturias's end proclaims man's beginning; little did he know that his hoped-for realm would live but very few years, outlasted only, but forever, by his wistful message.⁷⁵

3

If all the dead began to walk the earth
would be full of steps: *Mulata de tal*

Economic relations are *impersonal*. . . . It is the market, the exchange opportunity, which is functionally real, not the other human beings; these are not even means to action. The relation is neither one of cooperation nor one of mutual exploitation, but is completely nonmoral, nonhuman.

F. H. Knight, "The Ethics of Competition"

Homo oeconomicus is not behind us, but before, like the moral man, the man of duty, the scientific man and the reasonable man. For a long time man was something quite different: and it is not so long since he became a machine.

Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*

Violence alone, blind violence, can burst the barriers of the rational world and lead us into continuity.

Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme*

Hombres de maíz culminates with an exchange presented as a gift: Man turns to the land, which rewards him with its bounty. In striking contrast, *Mulata de tal* (1963) begins with a gift that is in every way a badge of subservience: Celestino Yumí gives his wife to the Devil in exchange for wealth.¹ *Hombres de maíz* celebrates the resurgence of the nuclear family and the foundation of the agricultural community; *Mulata de tal* announces their demise. In the thirteen years between these two novels all planned and established projects for public and collective enterprise in Guatemala were repudiated, hopes for social change shattered, and the men of maize once again recast as the disposable salt of the earth and not as its sustenance.

It is impossible to understand the violent transition from the productive agricultural community described in the epilogue of Asturias's first *neo-Indigenista* novel to the agonistic competition

and massive holocaust that destroy all semblance of order in *Mulata de tal* without considering the social and political evolution of Guatemala during these years. Asturias's physical, emotional, and intellectual efforts were fully aligned with his country's interests, which is to say, in his mind, with the interests of the community and the common man. Disappointment, anger, and resignation in the face of despair are couched in the pages of *Mulata* from its opening line – "Cheat! Tramp! Pig!" – to the children's song that concludes it (3). In the open-ended conclusion of *Hombres*, men and women return to Pisigüilito to harvest. The values they uphold – family, home, community, and land – are trampled in *Mulata*. There is nothing left to want in this world because there is nothing left to have in a country that has turned its back on what Asturias saw as its only hope for progress.² *Mulata* is the writer's lament for the once again dispossessed.³

The short-lived republic of "bread, land, and freedom"

In 1951, the first Guatemalan president of the twentieth century to complete his legal term, Juan José Arévalo, stepped down from office. Despite violent opposition from landowners and right wing bureaucrats (more than twenty attempts to topple the government were made between 1945 and 1951), Arévalo succeeded in implementing much needed land and social reforms in his country and prepared the ground for agrarian reform.⁴ This task fell to his successor, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. The major differences between Arévalo and Arbenz were pragmatic rather than ideological. Arévalo was a future-minded idealist. Arbenz was a man of action who set out to enforce, recasting when necessary, the legislation approved during Arévalo's term and his own. Working in rapid succession, they set out to change the backward agricultural production of Guatemala by means of a land reform that would "end latifundios and semifeudalistic practices" (Nájera Farfán, 156). Unfortunately for Guatemala, with more than 500,000 acres in its possession, the United Fruit Company, the largest single landowner in the country, felt directly attacked by such legislation. Neither Arévalo nor Arbenz could have imagined to what lengths the company would go to subvert their plans.

It was the Guatemalan government's intention to appropriate only those lands that were not used "for agricultural production or cattle" (Arévalo's government decree 712),⁵ and to offer an indemnity calculated on the basis of the tax value of the properties. The consequences of the law were almost immediate: "By June, 1954, about 100,000 families, or approximately half a million people, had received lands. The amount of private land distributed was 603,615 hectares (1,490,929 acres)," and this does not include the 101 national cooperative farms where land was given out to thousands of peasants (Melville and Melville, 65).

In total, 386,901 acres were expropriated from the United Fruit Company and an indemnity of \$612,572 was offered for the 209,842 acres taken from its property in Escuintla. This amounted to \$2.86 per acre for land for which the company had paid \$1.48 an acre. An economic policy detrimental to United Fruit's interests evolved into a direct political affront to the United States and came to be viewed as a threat to freedom throughout the American continent. The U.S. State Department intervened in favor of the United Fruit Company and claimed that the payment offered for its lands did not bear "the slightest resemblance to just evaluation" (*U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, September 14, 1953, 357). From that moment on, attempts were made to discredit the Guatemalan government; the label of communist, so persistently used against Arévalo, was brandished once again, this time against Jacobo Arbenz.

No one will deny the participation of Marxist intellectuals and labor leaders in Arbenz's government. Carlos Manuel Pellecer, a party member, was the head of the agrarian committee in Escuintla; José Manuel Fortuny and Victor Manuel Gutiérrez, both celebrated communists, were actively involved in the conception and implementation of the agrarian reform law; and four members of Congress were party affiliates. But the accusation of communist infiltration spread far and wide abetted by the collective hysteria of the Cold War years. Arbenz's policy and government were viewed without distinction as Marxist oriented when, ironically, the president's declared intention was to model his country's agricultural reform on U.S. land policy, "which favored the formation of capitalist small farmers with productive farms" (*Estrella de Centroamérica*, 171).

Arbenz encouraged the establishment of a "capitalist system in agriculture that would bring economic development to the whole country" by proposing a redistribution of unused lands (Estrella de Centroamérica, 171); productive capitalist investment was encouraged at all times and only neglected or fallow lands were confiscated.

The confrontation between the United Fruit Company and the Guatemalan agrarian law, or more to the point, between the United States government and the government of Guatemala, came to a head at the Tenth Inter-American Conference held in Caracas in 1954 and attended by U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.⁶ The countries of Latin America agreed 17 to 1 to stand together against the "Red peril," a thinly veiled decision that empowered the United States to intervene anywhere in the Americas in the defense against communism. The dissenting vote at the conference was Guatemala's, but by this time it was already too late; the fate of Arbenz's government was sealed.⁷

On May 25, 1954, Dulles formally accused the Guatemalan government of communist infiltration, an imputation that merely formalized the long-standing U.S. opposition to the Arbenz regime. Actually, since 1953, the United States had been supplying arms to the dissenting Guatemalan force training in Honduras and Nicaragua under the command of Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, who was to become the next president of Guatemala. On June 27, 1954, Arbenz handed over the government to a military junta headed by Colonel Enrique Díaz. He resigned after Castillo Armas, the head of the National Liberation Movement, "advanced and captured the Department of Chiquimula with the aid of six P-47's provided by the U.S. government and flown by personnel from the Central Intelligence Agency, then under the direction of Allen Dulles, brother of the Secretary of State" (Melville and Melville, 83).

It is difficult to understand the motives that might have led Arbenz to resign. One observer believes "that he feared imminent and massive United States participation . . . and felt that he could best avoid this by stepping down himself and turning his government over to Colonel Enrique Díaz, his Minister of Defense, and two other Colonels" (Melville and Melville, 83). Others, Asturias among them, felt that Arbenz would not have

obtained sufficient army support. The author of *Hombres de maíz* was in an excellent position to know because he was Guatemala's ambassador to El Salvador, and the Castillo Armas invasion was expected to enter Guatemala from that country. The writer would later tell Luis Harss that "the bombings of the capital and other towns panicked the population and at the same time, U.S. Ambassador Purefoy pulled strings until the army turned against the government" (*Into the Mainstream*, 94). For whatever reasons, the president chose to go into exile and lived to regret the election of Castillo Armas held within the junta of the National Liberation Movement on July 7, 1954. His deposition was a major turning point in Guatemalan politics. It announced the demise of the short-lived republic of "Bread, Land, and Freedom" that he had instituted and it spelled, like all violent changes of government in Latin America, the exodus of his closest supporters. During that same year, Asturias was stripped of his citizenship and did not return to Guatemala until five years later, when he was invited for the world premiere of his play, *La audiencia de los confines* (1957).

As the way of exile spelled confusion and despair for the likes of Arbenz and Asturias, the path to be followed at home in regards to government policy was perfectly clear for the newly elected Carlos Castillo Armas. In fact, it had been clearly traced for him by his predecessors. He simply set out to repeal everything they had done. His primary goal was the *desovietización* of Guatemala, and to carry it out he started by denying the vote to all illiterates, 72 percent of the country's population. Then he proceeded to pass his first agrarian decree (31) intended as "a gradual but firm repeal of the agrarian reform as institutionalized by Decree 900 (Arbenz's Agrarian Reform law) of the national Congress" (Monteforte Toledo, *Guatemala*, 437). The repeal consisted of the abolition of the Laws of Forced Rental (the tenants were given until March 31, 1955, to abandon their lands), the dissolution of cooperatives, and the return of expropriated lands to the United Fruit Company and all owners previous to the agrarian reform. He also amended the labor code in order to make unionization impossible, abolished minimum wages, terminated paid vacations, and extended the work week once again to forty-eight hours. Six months after Castillo Armas came to office, in December 1954, all goals of the

"desovietization" program were fulfilled. For Guatemala, the clock of progress had turned back ten years.

After the fall

During Arbenz's short-lived mandate, Asturias served as ambassador to El Salvador. Between 1951 and 1954 he was directly involved with both government policy and daily events, the men in power and the men in the fields. The literature he wrote during this period so clearly evinces this involvement that, as Luis Harss suggests, perhaps stretching a point, it could serve as "a social and economic geography of the continent" (92). But Asturias was not writing about the continent. He was in this respect the antithesis of his contemporary Alejo Carpentier, whose protagonists surface in the Venezuelan jungle, in Port au Prince, and in Paris. Like Carpentier, Asturias translates a social and economic geography into literature, but it is totally and exclusively his own country's geography. "I am a committed writer," he told Alfonso Ansueto in 1966, "but it is a commitment made with one reality and one world, which in this case are the reality and the people of Guatemala" (quoted in Pilón, 55).

His entire career, both literary and political, stands as corroboration of this commitment to his people; his novels and short stories are, thematically speaking, a survey of the evolving social reality of Guatemala. *El señor presidente* is an indictment of dictatorship, its villain patterned after a man like Estrada Cabrera. *Hombres de maíz* is a portrayal of the evolution toward the new kind of social order that follows Arévalo's land and social reforms. The problems of landownership, specifically the latifundio choking the country's economy and the role played by the United Fruit Company, provide in turn the subject for the Banana trilogy – *Strong Wind* (1949), *The Green Pope* (1954), and *The Eyes of the Buried* (1960) – which follows *Hombres*. Finally, the tone of bitter disappointment throughout *The Eyes of the Buried*, along with the realistic depiction of Arbenz's fall from power described in *Weekend in Guatemala* (1956), foreshadows the anger, madness, and chaos of *Mulata* (1963).

As was typical of Asturias, the blueprint for *Mulata* was not without precedent. In this instance, he turns for inspiration to

a curious philosophical and metaphysical treatise in the guise of a play: José Vasconcelos's little known and today seldom read *Prometeo vencedor* (1920). Not only does he find the thematic background for his 1963 novel in Vasconcelos, even the ethical stances embodied by the two demons in his novel – the Christian Candanga and the Mayan Cashtoc – are borrowed lock, stock, and barrel from the Mexican's prototypes.

The second part of *Prometeo vencedor* is a philosophical argument between Saturnino, who believes procreation should be stamped out, and the chorus, a character named Man, and an Old Man, all of whom clamor: "The divine is creation and joy, it cannot be suppression and death" [63]. Throughout the play Saturnino preaches the virtue of selfishness, the kind of self-striving that does not take the rest of humanity into consideration. Time and again, his thoughts are drowned by the voice of a chorus of women who argue: "And those who refused to pledge a bit of their souls to allow other beings to come into existence shall become the sustenance of creatures who will not be their children!" (70). Like the Mayan demon Cashtoc in Asturias's novel (but for different reasons), Saturnino "was against marriage and procreation for being goals contrary to the higher aims of the soul" (52). Vasconcelos's idea was that men had done everything that was possible to do here on earth and had failed miserably. It was high time to start anew, to make tabula rasa of the "failed creations" and start a "new humanity."

At the end of *Prometeo vencedor*, when Saturnino, "the king of death," finally disappears, a new breed of men comes out from hiding to announce they are ready to take on the struggle of existence. Represented by a character named the "Australiano," these are described as men and women belonging to a *raza joven*. At this point, Prometheus turns to Satan and observes: "The spirit of resolution has branched off once again and one of its branches, firmly rooted in the soil, begins once again the task of building societies and empires!" "The law of nature," he adds, "is repetition without end and the law of the spirit is to evolve while improving until the Absolute is mastered!" (86).

Prometheus further advises the fallen angel, "I don't dislike you, Satan. I see your misfortune which consists in lacking a purpose, an essence. Evil has no essence," he reflects, "it has no

purpose" (88–89). Likewise searching for life's purpose after almost succumbing to a catastrophic political debacle, Asturias seeks to lead man beyond the blindness of the barren selfishness that is represented by Saturnino in Vasconcelos's play. Along with Prometheus, the author of *Mulata* could declare, "Mi misión es impulsar el progreso de los hombres" (my mission is to promote human progress [Vasconcelos, 39]). The question that concerns us is, how does he do it?

Arbenz's government may have fallen, all social reforms may have been abrogated in Guatemala, but the word of the writer could still tear through the sheath of repression imposed on the people by the return of law that, once again, made men unequal to men. When Asturias sets out to expose the underbelly of an agonizing community whose ideas have literally gone to the devil, his first recourse is to defy the standards of fictional form and content. He conceives *Mulata* as an act of defiance, as a slap in the face of the most binding of conventions – language – and as a stage where he revels in the fictionalized destruction of all emblems of neurotic power: church, state, coherent discourse, and, ultimately, logic itself. The novel concludes with a self-consuming seventeen-page description of an earthquake thinly held together through a chain of ellipses and begins where *Hombres de maíz* leaves off: by focusing on the lives of a peasant couple, Celestino Yumí and Catalina Zabala, who are in every way a parody of Goyo Yic and María Tecún.

The encomium set forth in the epilogue of *Hombres de maíz* gives way to parody fourteen years later when Asturias again takes up the theme of the Indian's relationship to the land. It is not simply that his views have become more cynical but, sad as it may be, that they have grown more closely in keeping with the disappointing reality that surrounds him. The earthly garden he had described in fiction had been defiled by the greed of real men. For this reason, his committed message becomes even more belligerent than it had been in 1949. In *Hombres*, he portrays a sacrilege – planting corn for profit – which reduces man to nothing. In *Mulata*, where no holds are barred, he contemplates the grotesque nothingness that is existence deprived of meaning. To the change in tone corresponds the evolution of the protagonists of both novels. At the conclusion of *Hombres de maíz*, Goyo Yic makes a living by harvesting maize, the life

force that he symbolically begets; in *Mulata*, Celestino ekes out an existence from the dead wood he strips from the forest and temporarily thrives from the sale of his wife. Yic-Opossum is the prolific father of many children; Celestino is sterile, choosing gold over progeny. One is modeled after the civilized farmer of the Mayan Fourth Age; the other is a freebooter who lives to regret it.

The ability to give, produce, and generate is crucial in understanding *Hombres* and *Mulata*. Both novels portray the social and economic geography of Guatemala, one that went from a firmly entrenched system of latifundio to a short-lived community of government-allocated small farms and ended up reverting to the former system. For this reason, the economic principle of production and accumulation, a fundamental tenet of capitalism, plays a very major role in both works of fiction.

The devil bearing gifts

For *Homo oeconomicus*, consumerism has, to borrow Michele Richman's apt expression, "wedded desire to appropriation" (39). Possessions, the way to power, are the surest emblems of success and well-being in Western society. They are also the basis for firmly embedded class differences, which, as in Guatemala, are as durable as man will make them. To debunk the chimerical link between goods and happiness – a basic tenet of consumer society – Asturias recounts both the tale of an ambitious mortal, Celestino Yumí, and of the greediest immortal, the Devil. *Mulata* unfolds in five movements, or cantos (Table 3.1), each planned as a dialogue, each portraying a struggle over material or spiritual gains, and each highlighting the central position of exchange as the foundation of culture.

In the first movement, the unwitting peasant Celestino is paired off against Tazol, the Mayan maize demon.⁸ The Indian exchanges his wife, Catalina Zabala, for wealth, but the economic bounty he receives gives him little satisfaction because to have it he forfeits what he most cherishes, Catalina herself.⁹ To make matters worse, he is ensnared by a provocative mulatto woman who arouses his lust without satisfying it.¹⁰ Mysterious, greedy, violent, and barren, she is likened to Moon, who will only lie her back to her husband so "he can't make babies with

Table 3.1

Canto	Characters	Object of desire
I	Yumí vs. Tazol	Wealth
II	Yumí vs. Catalina	Knowledge
III	Tazol vs. Candanga	Life and death
IV	Giroma vs. Mulata	Sex
V	Chimalpín vs. Candanga	Life

her" (57). Desperate, Celestino obtains from Tazol the return of Catalina, only to be shortchanged once again. She comes back transformed into a dwarf and becomes a toy for his new wife. In the end, the Yumís trap the Mulata inside a mountain and return to their hometown penniless but a couple once again.

The quest for gold teaches the Yumís the metal's glaring limitations and the value of life for its own sake. Back in Quiavicús, they revel in their experience-earned poverty and stoically argue that "a good life is life and nothing more, there is no bad life, because life itself is the best thing we have" (92). But contentment does not suffice when it is exclusive of others, and Celestino and Catalina provide only for themselves. The life they lead, centered on their own needs, is in all ways contrary to the communal creed of Mayaland. The characters in *Mulata*, reflections cast in fiction of the men and women of Guatemala, "have stopped existing in reality and have become fictitious creatures, since they do not live for the community" (173). As history has taken care to demonstrate, land will not bring men closer together but, rather, work to keep them apart by the mere fact of being property, privately owned and fiercely guarded. When men obtain land (Celestino is a case in point), their appetite for possessions is merely whetted. For Guatemala, building a society on the basis of communal property had proven premature perhaps, even, serendipitous.¹¹

Because all dreams of collective ventures have dissolved in reality and, according to *Mulata*, because gold and power are as transitory as the Devil wishes to make them, the only recourse left to the men of maize is to seek knowledge, the kind that em-

anates from experience and can be used to change the world. So the Yumis, humble everyones in search of purpose and meaning, embark on a second journey in order to become great sorcerers. To the quest for gold succeeds the quest for power, namely, the wish to overcome death and ailment through magic. But the Yumis are mere cogs in the wheelworks of all-embracing entities that work through them and have come to signify them.

In the third movement of *Mulata* the Devil takes over where man leaves off. Celestino is possessed by Cashtoc, the Mayan demon, and the sexton of Tierrapaulita (where they have gone to become sorcerers), by the spirit of the Mulata representing the power of Candanga, the Christian Devil. As Asturias makes amply clear, the struggle for supremacy between the earth-born devils and the Christian ones represents the fight between the past (tradition and, specifically, the communal values of the Indian) and the present (the time of commercial society and of the hegemony of a foreign religion imposed on Mesoamerica by white men). The Christian demon wants to encourage propagation because, according to him, "the more men . . . the more men for hell" (304), but Tazol wants to turn man into dust "for his presumption of singularizing himself . . . for his presumption of existing in isolation, alien to the millions of destinies that are being woven and unwoven around him!" (173-174).

Before the fire holocaust that crowns Cashtoc's wishes, Catalina Zabala, by then grown into the great mother witch, grapples with the powerful Mulata for the possession of her sex, "that living matter which is burning, separated from the body where it had been" and which Yumí cannot do without (259). Finally, in the fifth and last episode, Father Chimalpín, the priest of Tierrapaulita, challenges the Christian Devil and his right to incite men to breed. In the end, all ambition and all confrontation are shown to be futile vanity, confused alarms of struggle and flight. Celestino is crushed under the crumbling walls of his house, the Mulata burns, Catalina is buried alive, and Chimalpín becomes an elephant. The world of sound and fury bursts forth to signify nothing or, in all appearance, to signify nothing but despair.

Asturias designs the struggle of life in *Mulata* as a symphonic dialogue on the theme of exchange and the fruits it bears or

withholds from man. He chooses the themes of covetousness and impermanence because he conceives his novel as a polemical challenge to a culture he has come to deplore. As he sets out to translate his feelings into words, his main problem is how best to subvert an order, both economic and religious, which he sees as madness disguising itself as rational law.

His study of ethnography and anthropology had made him familiar with the work of Caillois, Mauss, and Georges Bataille. To these writers and thinkers, motivated like him by a moral imperative, he turns for theoretical guidance. From Mauss he learns the mechanics of gift exchange, namely, how in all cultures transfer of property is used to fulfill obligations. In contrast with the economies regulated by gift giving that Mauss studies, the superstructure of his own country offers Asturias a model of utility based on acquisition and, above all, on the conservation of goods. The fact that in a country with a history of communal property such as Guatemala human nature must obey the capitalistic principles of production and conservation in order to view itself as worthwhile in the eyes of the modern world provides Asturias with the first cue he was seeking to subvert the reigning order. If the new law of his land was based on accumulation he would demonstrate, in fiction at least, how wealth for its own sake can blow away like dust in the wind.

A second feature of *Mulata* grows out of the most glaring difference between archaic and capitalistic systems of economy: the opposition between individualism and collective sense. Since his days as a student of ethnography Asturias knew that in Western societies prestations take place through markets established among individuals, whereas in most pre-Columbian systems, such as the Maya, "it is groups, and not individuals, which carry on exchange, make contracts, and are bound by obligations" (Mauss, *The Gift*, 3). He had learned, as much from his own experience among the Indians as from reading Mauss, how in societies of the second type the gift given carries with it a part of the donor's own nature and substance. The French ethnologist argues that when a gift changes hands it signifies not only an economic exchange but that physical and spiritual intercourse has taken place through the human essence displaced unto the object given (10). "And," adds Mauss, "to refuse

to give is – like refusing to accept – the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse” (11).

Friendship and intercourse, the basis for communal living, had been praised and rewarded in *Hombres de maíz*; in the same manner, but differently stated, in *Mulata*, “all of those who forget, deny or reject their condition as kernels of corn, parts of an ear, and become self-centered, egotistical individualists” are annihilated (173). Asturias’s second *neo-Indigenista* novel explores the headwaters of his own disappointment. *Hombres de maíz* was conceived as an outburst of hope; *Mulata* – a direct confrontation with historical truths – as its antithesis. The earlier tale turns men of maize into heroes; the latter portrays the *indio latinizado* and his inexorable downfall into the mire.

Sadly, all fictional portrayals were modeled on reality as the author lived it. Arbenz’s agrarian reform law had steered Guatemala in the direction of community interests similar in many ways to those of the Mayan civilization of the Fourth Age that Asturias so admired. But the abrogation of this law reinstates a regime based on individual exchange in which only a few benefit and, most assuredly, no spiritual or physical intercourse comes about. Castillo Armas’s government destroys not only the incipient spirit of cooperation but also the moral fiber of a country with a communal past by rewarding individualism and private property and condemning community life and shared tasks and profits. It was in every way a second coming of the conquering hordes who trampled over all that was dear to the early inhabitants of Mesoamerica. “Alvarado ripped the gold rings from the ears of the lords,” writes Asturias in *Hombres de maíz*, and when the gold is all gone Castillo Armas sees to it that even the land is ripped from the hands of the peasants. His hordes, too, “were savages” (16).

However, in 1963, Asturias still believes it is not too late to have the last word. If the ideals of the community have been toppled by the principles of accumulation and self-profit, he can still satirize these principles by dramatizing a third system of exchange antithetical to the reigning order, a system based on gratuitous expenditure. In writing *Mulata* he was, like Georges Bataille, and for similar reasons, decrying the classical principle of utility based on material gain and suggesting its downfall from sheer moral bankruptcy.

In an essay entitled "The Principle of Loss," Bataille describes two kinds of human activity (*O.C.*, I, 305–308). The first is based on production and conservation; the second, on activities he describes as "unproductive expenditure" such as war, games, spectacles, arts, and perverse sexual activity. In this kind of *dépense*, or expenditure "the emphasis is placed on the loss," on the squandering of energy, of objects and of men, usually in the form of sacrifice (*O.C.*, I, 305). The Bataillean notion evolves from the "potlatch," which Mauss identifies as having two variants. Among Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest such as the Tlingit, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, and Haida, riches exchange hands during marriages, funerals, and initiations for the purpose of humiliating the recipient, who is then compelled to reciprocate in excess of the original gift. But the gift is not the only form of potlatch. Tribes and clans may also incur spectacular destruction of goods, which may include burning entire villages, sacrificing dog teams, casting ingots of copper into the sea, to defy their rivals. Such expenditure, the very antithesis of the Western principle of accumulation, actually confers an honorific quality on the donor and is not only sensed as positive but becomes the only means of acquiring glory and honor in these cultures (Mauss, *The Gift*, 3–5).

Bataille goes on to distinguish between two kinds of *dépense*: the ceremonies, festivities, rituals, and war where squandering is real, and symbolic dramatizations such as literature and theater that "provoke anguish and horror through representations of the tragic loss" (*O.C.*, I, 307). Laughter as well as anguish can emanate from symbolic *dépense*, and both are considered as modalities of expenditure. In fact, the explosiveness of the former abrades conventions and human pretense to reveal "the inanity of being that we are" (*O.C.*, V, 108). In addition, by undermining the desire to accumulate (materially as well as spiritually, that is to say, as a withholding of self), all forms of expenditure point in the direction of self-discovery since "the instant when acquisition will resolve itself in pure *dépense*, is precisely the consciousness of self, which is to say, consciousness which no longer has a thing as its object" (*O.C.*, VII, 272).

Both the notion of expenditure as a system antithetical to accumulation and the idea that consciousness of self follows the instant when acquisition resolves itself in pure *dépense* are sem-

inal to the conception of *Mulata*. They enable Asturias symbolically to stamp out the power structure choking his country and to reveal the futility of man's ambition. When gold, power, and knowledge are shown as transient (all characters die, villages crumble, the syntax is impaired), all that remains – to be read as a moral lesson – is man's struggle to obtain what he deems desirable, namely his will to be.

In order to make prominent the notion of being instead of the events of a character's life – subject and object of most works of fiction – Asturias starts by disrupting the mimetic contract. As he had done in *Hombres de maíz*, he forgoes character development and conjures up yet another principle of narrative evolution. Rather than telling the tale of a protagonist, he decides to allegorize subjectivity in general terms – lust, greed, vanity – and to use characters as vehicles to incarnate virtues (mostly lacking) and vice. He describes the futility of egocentrism and argues that only culture – the community – has duration, continuity, and therefore meaning. Deny the pre-eminence of the family of man, he suggests, and life loses all sense, individuals become puppets strutting on the stage of life. In fact, from the moment that lucre is preferred to kindred, the wellspring of mankind runs dry.¹²

The perversion of hoarding, the love of gold, can only breed egoism and cruelty: "Rich people don't think about people who suffer!" argues the devil in *Mulata* (15). Human nature is base, so much so that in the order of things, wealth and the inanimate mineral world have a lasting quality that man himself forfeits in order to hoard them. Since to have gold Celestino gives away Catalina, for example, he squanders his own sense of continuity by rejecting the potential bearer of the children he will never have. And what is more, the protagonists of the novel are not only denied the ability to procreate; they are systematically stripped of any developing sense of self that could otherwise give the reader an illusion of their permanence.

Expenditure enters the novel at the level of characterization more than at any other: The protagonists of *Mulata* lack stable identities; having lost touch with the soil, "the I of the earth," they lose their "own I" (202). They don't even have fixed names, shapes, purpose, or reason for being, unfortunate as they are "in the nothingness and the emptiness of their ego"

(175).¹³ Celestino Yumí is also Hayumihaha, the dwarf Chiltic, José Quiquín, Blas Pirir, Genitivo Rancún, and Evaristo Tupuc (205). His wife, Catalina Zabala, or the great Giroma, adopts many guises and shapes as well; she is Lili Puti and Juana Puj, Juana Puti and Niniloj. Both she and her husband are giants and dwarfs, human and animals, whole and mutilated (“headless body fidgeting on the ground” [119]), like many characters in *Hombres de maíz*. But whereas in *Hombres* mutilation is seen as part of an evolution analogous to that of Hunahpu’s and is meant to suggest renewal and permanence, in *Mulata* characters transform themselves in an ongoing process that leads them unremittingly toward a death already present in life.

Each is “carrion without an odor, a leper without leprosy, half a corpse” (223) because, like the *Mulata* herself, they have sold their “flesh to the sun of riches” (215).¹⁴ More than any other character in the novel, she revamps sexuality into a love of lucre and covets Yumí’s solid gold skeleton more than his body; actually, she wishes his death in order to get her hands on it. Celestino is no better when it comes to gold; he gives up his wife to become “the richest man in Quiavicús” (12). Even the faithful Catalina admits that more than her husband’s words “[his] riches console her” (60). Greed, then, is the essence of all relationships in part I of the novel; the more characters have, the more they want. For example, Teo Timoteo, Yumí’s friend, is consumed by envy at the sight of Celestino’s bottomless purse in spite of his own abundant fortune inherited from a parish priest who burst from eating after he took diligent care “to send him cracklings, pickled loins, pig’s feet, sausages, [and] blood puddings, until he had a stroke from eating so much pig meat and died a saintly death” (21).

In their lust for gold, as in all matters of the body, the protagonists of *Mulata* without exception heed the Devil’s advice: “Money is the best shield: against God, money; against the law, money; money for meat; money for glory; money for everything, for everything, money” (32). They abide by the creed of gold well beyond infernal expectations despite the Devil’s cunningly perverse warnings to the effect that wealth, like a rope, weighs around their neck “like the most valuable decoration a human being can desire, the noose of the millionaire” compel-

ling each man to hang himself "as a miser or as a spendthrift, by hoarding or by wasting" (32).

Asturias indicates that greed has not always had the upper hand in Middle America, however. Not, at least, until white man, that "long-legged creature bursting with blood and thirsting after toxic things" brought it to the New World (41). Since that time, when love of gold took hold, life became comparable to hell itself, prompting the Christian Devil to observe: "What is modern life, progress, civilization if not my I in the dust of words?" (231). If living life in perpetual opposition to one's cultural values is hell on earth, it follows that life after death, based on a wish for continuity, is anathema. Why sustain suffering and prolong the intolerable? Disillusioned in this world, men hold onto the "absolute assurance that at the end of life there is nothing, absolutely nothing!" (230)

Such apparent despondency is not a new development in Asturias's literary portrayals, but the festive gloominess of *Mulata* is far more complex than the grimness of works like *El señor presidente*. In earlier writings Asturias uses the portrayal of despair as an instigator of action, while in *Mulata* – at first glance at least – the sun of action has dawned and set. The love and the sharing that constitute the seedbed of the agrarian community in *Hombres de maíz* are still alluded to in the allegory of greed ("loving more is giving one's self more, is reaching, through that giving, everything that surrounds, a nursery of happiness where one fulfills everything") but with the one difference that in this novel mention of love and generosity only serves to stir up memories of what might have been (244). After all, when love is exchanged for gold, man's capacity for communication and human contact atrophies to the point of impotence. To demonstrate this tenet, Asturias takes up the theme of sterility, which he had already developed in his earlier *neo-Indigenista* saga.

In *Hombres de maíz*, the enemies of the corn men cannot conceive. Their children, if they had them before the curse was cast, fade into thin air. A major chord of hope is struck in the epilogue, however. By returning to the land, man reestablishes a balance with his environment; he produces corn and, by analogy, begets "many children" (329). In *Mulata*, Celestino Yumí is

impotent, the *Mulata* barren, and even Candanga, the blue-eyed Christian Devil, is incapable of breeding, for he lacks "the liquor that gives life" (189). As was the case in *Hombres de maíz*, there is one exception to the curse of sterility, but instead of being a creature whose object is to generate life, it is the Mayan demon, Tazol, whose one aim is to exterminate the race of man "since they did not live for the community" (173).¹⁵

Ruled by commerce and greed, life has neither joy nor love. In Asturias's eyes, it has become a mockery transcended only through laughter and, most decidedly, not through chuckles of joy but through the Bataillean cackle that reveals and revels in the inanity of being. In Christian heaven, pagan earth, or the daily hell of existence, laughter is the mirror that shows up man for what he really is. When the fallen angel of the Christian god – analogue and emblem of all creatures who succumb to an insatiable longing – is exposed in his own damnation, no longer the embodiment of heavenly beauty but, instead, "a man with a face of asphalt, traces of hair standing on end in the place of a beard," this revelation comes through laughter (238). Reflected on the bare mirrored teeth of the three legendary giants of Mayan folk tradition – Zipacna, Cabracan, and Hurakan – he sees himself transformed for the first time:

And how many times was I there in that multiplication of my figure on the teeth of the giants, who kept on tooting the jungle of a laugh that had no end? They would drop teeth from laughing so much, and others would grow out, and others, and others, all for the same torrential laugh, clean water mirrors where my image was being multiplied. (239)

The Christian Devil sees his fall from grace pictured on the giants' falling teeth. As it turns out, falling is a motif associated with laughter throughout the novel. Merriment in *Mulata* comes hand in hand with discharging or rejecting part of oneself and this discharge is fully in keeping with the theme of expenditure. When the *Mulata* laughs, her teeth, moved by that interminable cackle, "hung as if they were loose in the air" (58), and if Catalina Zabala refuses to join in her merriment it is because, as she claims, "I begin to laugh and laugh and laugh, until I wet myself from laughing, without stopping my laughing and on until I can feel my teeth getting loose" (my translation, 57).¹⁶ Laughter is also used throughout the novel to satirize the

raw core of human bestiality on the basis of the model developed by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. Asturias conceives a breed of boar men, or "sauvages," who, like Swift's legendary strain of civilized horses, the Houyhnhnms, live in herds, protect one another, and exhibit the virtues of faithfulness and reliability that both the humans in his novel and the Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels* have forgotten.

Asturias's "sauvages" are men who had been dancing in ritual gear disguised as wild boars. While they danced they drank corn liquor by the bucketful and their drunkenness excited them instead of making them sleepy. They began jumping higher and higher, and this displeased Tazol, who enticed them to a mountain where they soon discovered that they were unable to remove their disguises and so remained wild boars and bred their children that way (87).¹⁷

One of these creatures catches up with Yumí at the beginning of his journey to Tierrapaulita and befriends him. Man and boar hunt together, but Yumí is unjustly caught for stealing the chickens his "sauvage" friend is about to eat. The civilized animal does not leave his human partner in the lurch, however. When Yumí is taken to prison by an irate chicken breeder, the boar rescues him from a vat of boiling soap and takes him to the mountain of the wild boars. Yumí is sworn into their clan and given the name "Hayumihaha." In boar language, the reader is told, the particle "ha" is placed in front, and two "ha's" at the end, of the name of those animals that speak like humans. The idea for the prefix comes to Asturias from the first syllable of the Spanish word for boar, *jabalí*.¹⁸ Nevertheless, from the beginning of the episode he makes much of the fact that this syllable is also the onomatopoeia for laughter. This second denotation both establishes and prescribes the ironic distance from which the more civilized but persecuted boar men contemplate the barbarian two-legged animals who slaughter and eat them, "not knowing that they are eating human flesh" (75).

As Asturias makes quite plain, the boars are in every way superior to man. They have a collective instinct and they are honest and compassionate. To make his point even more explicit, the author portrays the boars as men who have been metamorphosed, a feature that makes cannibals of those who eat them

and allows yet another comparison with *Hombres de maíz*. In the earlier novel the exploiters who ravaged the soil traded corn as a commodity, unaware that this sacred grain is "like our children," and literally, "flesh of our flesh" (204). The victims in both fictions, boar men and maize men, are dispossessed and unjustly sacrificed; their superiority is trampled by the brawn of creatures described as cannibals: "They don't eat the corpse materially," explains the Mayan devil, "but they stuff themselves on human flesh, people who exploit the working man, ranchers, coffee growers, plantation owners, those in whom the Christian and the wild beast are all woven up together" (74). Nature itself plays a joke on the tragic situation of the boars by endowing them with a mask that mimics the arch of a smile as it stretches from tusk to tusk. Perpetually mirthful, with a "laugh that ended in a point" (72) and a name emblematic of the laughter they embody (all boars are three times "ha"), they symbolize through features and designation the very sound they are unable to emit: "There are two things that we can't do no matter how human we may be – laugh and cry," confides the grandmother sow (75).¹⁹ In contrast, man, the laughing animal, is condemned to grovel in the tragedy of his own making and doomed to die without descent.

Sterility and expenditure proclaim the end of stirps, the obsolescence of man in Asturias's novel. The rational principle of production and accumulation that guides character behavior in the first part of *Mulata* evolves, unavoidably, into an economy of death and destruction conforming with countless predictions of the last stage of history: the dominion of death in life. In addition, the infecundity motif explains the salient position played by the moon in this novel and provides yet another contrast with *Hombres de maíz*, conceived under the aegis of the sun.

The munificence of the "heavenly orb," its propensity to give without exacting a return, is a feature of all heliocentric religions. "The sun gives without receiving," writes Bataille; "men were aware of this long before astrophysics measured this increasing prodigality; they observed it ripen harvests and linked the splendor that is his to the gesture of he who gives without receiving" (*O.C.*, VII, 35). To the Maya, the sun is Hunahpu, giver of corn. Asturias's tale of creation, based on the Mayan Book of Genesis, dramatizes it as the emblem of life and iden-

tifies it with Gaspar Ilóm and Goyo Yic in an epic of hope that culminates in fecundity and abundance. This is why, when the time came to illustrate the end of hope, he could choose no better emblem than the sun's counterpart.

According to Mesoamerican myth, Moon takes without giving in return; she absorbs the light of the sun without producing her own; she is barren, wanton, and fickle. Asturias impersonates her in the character of the Mulata whom he describes as "the back of the moon" referring to her whim of receiving Yumí exclusively "from behind" (41), just like the moon goddess who "always has her back turned . . . because if she were to turn around the sun would take her from the front and they would breed monsters" (54). Moon's refusal of genital contact is instrumental to Asturias's narrative scheme for two reasons. First of all, by identifying the Mulata with the goddess he makes her, *a priori*, infecund. The Mulata's repudiation of sexual intercourse ("like all great females, how distant in bed!" [123]) is both a withholding of self and, simultaneously, a dismissal of procreation ("Because with her back to the sun, he can't make babies with her" [57]). Her identification with the moon circumstantiates her focal position in the novel. Greedy, selfish, and sterile, what better symbol of the economy of accumulation and of the end of the race could Asturias resort to than the mythic wife of the sun clothed in the guise of a honeyed-skin Mulata?

To further the point of her sterility and at the same time its unnaturalness, Asturias first underendows and then strips the novel's namesake of her sexual organs. Early in part I, Catalina Zabala informs Yumí that the Mulata "isn't a man and she isn't a woman either. She doesn't have enough inky-dinky for a man and she has too much dinky-inky for a woman" (53) and two hundred pages later, as if to resolve the imbalance, the same Catalina sends a sex-stealing dwarf "who, with one bite, snatched off the certain Mulata's sex" (252). Sexual inadequacy and incompleteness do not prevent the Mulata from being cast as an object of desire, however. In fact, true to the sphere of action of her patroness, who appears prodigal while actually a satellite, the Mulata reflects desires she is never willing to fulfill. She sells herself to Celestino, for instance, and when he hands her a roll of bills she slips it "between the tantalizing

breasts that Yumí could not get his hands on, because as soon as he touched them she would twist away and slip out of his grasp" (38). She personifies desire, although her own sexuality is autarchic and, for reasons that will be elucidated in the next section, sadomasochistic. Furthermore, her identity with her own sexual organs ("without my sex, I'm nameless" [253]) and their ensuing loss becomes a metaphor for the situation of all protagonists who are willing to trade their dearest possessions for gold and lose their very essence in the process.

In a literary economy where the protagonists are recklessly willing to give up a whale to catch a sprat, the Mulata functions as a degree zero: She welcomes all projections of lust and desire, but gives nothing in return. In contrast to the other characters, who depend on each other or on an ideology in order to give meaning to their lives, she is autonomous to the point of being autogenetic. Indeed, when in the last chapter she reappears, an "old woman turned young . . . the mother of herself, desubstantiated as a child-bearer and reformed as a daughter" (301), and claims, "I'm the daughter of the one I am . . . I'm my daughter . . . I'm my mother" (299), she confirms her status as the embodiment of all the negative values that are openly censured in Mayaland as well as in Asturias's novel: greed, selfishness, sterility, and a sense of autonomy that must be seen as exclusive of intercourse and, ultimately, of communication.

As well and as much as all forces of creation, however, all the negative values embodied by Moon cease to be at the end of the novel. As the devil giveth, it seems, the devil taketh away. The Mulata, "honeyed firmness" (39) first seen "in a yellow outfit" (37), her back "golden, like lemon-colored clay" (58), fictional flesh and blood analogue of both Moon and of the shiny metal Yumí covets, lasts longer than desire but not throughout eternity.²⁰ Love in *Mulata* is swapped for gold, giving for taking, the generosity of Catalina for the selfishness of Moon made flesh; but during the holocaust of the last chapter all objects of barter wither just the same, as do their recipients. The Mulata dies, but her unbridled eroticism lingers on as an expression of defiance. The weapon that is her body, not beckoning flesh but fallow furrow of lust, lashes out at the world with all the projected fury of Asturias himself, hustling to rend asunder with words and images the ostensibly decorous but in reality vermin-ridden bastion of the establishment.

The transgressive power of eroticism

As in *Hombres de maíz*, individualized characterization is less important to the narrative scheme of *Mulata* than the collective entity that Asturias describes as “kernels of corn, parts of an ear” (17). This is why, in all his writings, he never strays far from the subject of man in his relationship to others and, therefore, to culture. His lifelong fascination with sounds and sentences was at the root of a profound preoccupation with human contact and his novels typify, without exception, his frustration at establishing and maintaining such contact.

“Real men,” he writes in 1963, “the ones made out of corn, have stopped existing in reality and have become fictitious creatures, since they did not live for the community” (*Mulata*, 173). His disappointment was as plain as the historical reasons that set it off. “For his presumption of singularizing himself, considering himself an end in himself!” argues the Mayan Devil, “man must be destroyed and his constructions wiped out” (*Mulata*, 173–174). To efface egoism from the world of his fiction, Asturias comes up with two programs. In *Mulata* his first aim is to suppress all the living through fire, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes. His second is to annul whole generations even “before they were engendered” (181). For this reason, with one telling exception, all protagonists are portrayed as sterile. When Celestino Yumí returns from the fair of San Martín Chile Verde, where he parades himself with his fly open, his wife reproves him for his shamelessness. “Have pity on me!” she cries out, “since you didn’t give me children” (7), and playing on words, the people of Quiavicús claim that poor, pathetic Celestino is so “impotent” that “he doesn’t even button himself up the way a person should after he goes” (7). Furthermore, they scoff, he will surely end up in hell for his immodesty and there they will “burn up his cage and its inhabitant” (17). Little do they know that the unbuttoned fly is really the Devil’s lure to make women sin, and that sin is Celestino’s ticket to becoming the richest man in Quiavicús.

His “prodigious fly” induces women to evil thoughts with such success that Tazol, the maize demon, amply rewards him with the one and only currency bandied about in the novel: counterfeit (3). Scratch’s pinchbeck sweetener is traditionally the shiny coating on a bitter pill and Tazol makes no exception

for Yumí. For this reason, the gold he gives the greedy Celestino is trailed by the honey-skinned Mulata who mirrors in her person the gleam of false currency. She beguiles with a prophylactic beauty that will not bear fruit. "Children?" she hisses, "it makes me laugh . . . sons of . . . from where? Because I'm barren!" (40). Ungiving as well as infecund, she will not even face her husband in lovemaking and embitters him with her "whim of receiving him from behind" (41).

The theme of sterility is so fundamental to the conception of *Mulata* that Asturias wields it as an emblem and carries it beyond all conventional bounds. Woman, the bearer of children, becomes the harbinger of death in his scheme. Barrenness extends, metonymically, to "the emptiness of her sex, the most solitary of pits" (111), and the man who pursues her, blind drunkard that he is, unremittingly falls "into the sexual emptiness of gullies" (180-181). Treacherous wreath, her lodestone sex converges "toward the mortuary fuzz of her pubis" (181). She attracts man "by her physical beauty, scarcely covered, and ready to turn into a vertical fall until he breaks his skull and body on the annihilating rocks. He falls and doesn't find love, but death, his eyes bugged out, his bones sticking out of his flesh, bloody vomit on his lips" (111). Sex and death are brought together in the most outlandish of matrimones because the function and destiny of the fantastic females in *Mulata* is,

to love with thorns, to wound what [they] desire, to scratch what [they are] searching for, to perpetuate the crime of crimes, carrying a man up to an orgasm and in that instant sinking all [their] vegetable needles into his flesh, the ones that collect their prey mercilessly, because they are poisoned with a substance that blends into one the convulsions of love and those of death. (111-112)

The impulse to extend life through sex functions in this instance as a death drive. The implications of such concord of contraries are simply shattering. Repudiating genital organization and the notion of reproduction that nature and society impose on man is tantamount to denying the reality principle whose primordial goal is production and the preservation of the species. To transcend that principle by circumscribing man's activity to an unbridled and unproductive eroticism be-

tokens in turn the hegemony of the pleasure principle that steers the action of Asturias's philippic to its only logical end. Play – verbal, sexual, morphological – becomes the favored mode of *Mulata*. Parentage, propagation, and production, falling as they do under the aegis of the reality principle, are substituted by a teeming eroticism described by the author as “the use and abuse of all the means invented to keep carnal pleasure without complying with the divine mandate to increase and multiply” or, in other words, portrayed as a gratuitous expenditure fully aligned with the overall economy of the novel (244).²¹

Sex is readily equated with production, and eroticism with the violation of the drive to increase and multiply. As we have pointed out, Asturias's narrative aim was to destroy the human animal in order to abolish selfishness from the surface of the world.²² Making humanity sterile was one thing, but why stop short within a scheme that revels in excess? The people of his country, fully equipped and fully able to create a new society, had been unwilling to produce it, had even gutted the machine that might have set it in motion. Why not let their very bodies represent this inability to create? The coming together of man and woman in *Mulata* must be no more and no less than “instincts of bestial recreation, poisonous thoughts, wormlike caresses, perturbed contacts” (244) having no other issue than the offspring of Tazol, “the useless leaf” of the corncob (32).

As love spells death in *Mulata*, intercourse, pregnancy, and birth are banned from its pages. Sadism, masochism, homosexuality, necrophilia, zoophilia, and sodomy take their place in a bawdy carnival where all values are defiled. Once we posit defiance as the aim and transgression as the narrative means of this novel, we are ready to grasp why sexuality is always partnered with feculence and pain and, more specifically, why characters use their bodies to strike out, hurt, and ultimately destroy each other.

Sadism, we know from Freud (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 73–75), represents an introversion of the innate death instinct; the transformation of the desire to die into the desire to kill functions as an ally of the sexual task that maintains and enriches life. The characters of *Mulata* are, like the novel's namesake, maneuvered by a “raging need to destroy” (43). Their

bodies are their best weapons to carry out this mandate as they proceed to tear each other to pieces.

The dwarf Huasanga goes up to Catalina Zabala (who has become the great sorceress Giroma) "and with one big tug pulled off her sex" (136), "a terrible vengeance," we are told, "the worst thing that can happen to a woman" (136) and one that is repeated when the same Huasanga snatches away the Mulata's "trap with little lizard holes" and gives it to the Zabala woman "who kept the Mulata's sex as an ocarina" (214).

Much earlier in the novel, Catalina suffers in silence when her powerful enemy, Moon turned flesh, paws Celestino "and bite(s) him so hard that many times her great mouth of a proud beast was smeared with blood, blood that it savored and swallowed" (43). The Mulata was vicious, "*una perdidota*" (61):

When she felt the body of her husband fall beside her in bed . . . she grabbed him by the hair and laughing hoarsely and wrathfully beat him against the pillow until she grew tired. A viper that had hypnotized its victim and demands that it not be defenseless, demanding, obliging it to participate in its own death like an invited guest. (45)

Her love of torture even extends beyond the grave; she covets the solid gold skeleton that supposedly hides under Yumi's poor rag of a body. In the lustful fantasies from which lucre is never absent, "she would cut off one of his arms, then the other one, and she would put him in a bin, thorax and head of white gold, waiting for his death so she could skin him, throw away what would rot, and extract intact the rest of the treasure" (46). The Mulata's plans are cut short when Yumi's wife becomes a great witch herself, strips away her magic, orders the Mulata's body cut in half, and casts it into a pool where her husband can watch, floating by, "now an eye, now a breast, now a lip, or the sex of that marvelous creature" (216).

What is most curious is that, paradoxical though it may seem, these sadistic tableaux are fully in keeping with the organic aim to maintain and enhance life as delineated by Freud. We know from him that the innate and self-destructive tendency – the death instinct seeking to return life to the peace of the inorganic world – is in eternal conflict with Eros, striving for and bringing about "the renewal of life" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 9). The organism converts destructive energy into an ag-

gression directed toward others that preserves it from harm and makes its own existence possible. This conversion is fully operative in *Mulata* where aggression is so often used as a means to destroy. What is unconventional is that Asturias has no intention of preserving his characters from harm. Therefore, the self-destructive tendency typically directed outwardly appears in his scheme reverting just as much inwardly, transformed into a seething masochism that consumes one and all starting with the Mulata.

Perversely, she has "herself chased by archers who were so good that they would shoot their arrows at her and aim for just the slightest scratch, a feeling of multiple wounds . . . and right there, the suicidal furor, the wish to do away with her present image in exchange for a future image" would take hold (46). Never satisfied, she pierces her earlobes until they bleed so profusely that she looks as if she "had ruby earrings on" (57). She has her dwarf, Catalina-Lilli Puti, prick her body, tentatively at first, until finally she asks her "to bury the point of the pin deeper into her flesh. And then deeper, and then deeper" (56). Mistress of doom, the Mulata is actually a guest at her own banquet, a corpse at her own wedding where she is pricked out of her senses when Yumí, transformed into a porcupine, buries "all his needles of delight into her dark flesh" (212). And she is not alone in composing this ode to pain because all the people of Tierrapaulita

take pleasure in their buttocks, others in their thighs, others in their milky teats, without any lack of those who let four fingernails grow so that they can lacerate themselves with them until their backs bleed, or males who pass hot pins through their virile members. (104)

This last type of torture, directed at the sexual organs, becomes the most typical figuration of sexual punishment in the novel. Portrayed as a castration in the case of female characters and as a pocketing of "sacred organs to annul generations in their germ state" in the instance of the Tierrapaulitans (181), it appears as an "emptying virility" which veers into homosexuality in the case of Jerónimo de la Degollación (200).

In part II, possessed by the soul of the Mulata (who is in turn penetrated by the essence of Cashtoc), the sexton feels that "poisonous women's hair was circulating through his veins

instead of blood" (200). This startling and seemingly gratuitous triple penetration (Cashtoc, Mulata, sexton) turns out to be fundamental to the presentation of the themes of sterility and pivotal to the development of the entire novel.²³ Cashtoc, lodged in the body of the Mulata, enters Jerónimo in order to battle Yumí, inhabited in turn by the Devil of heaven, Candanga. The chapter in which this battle takes place is a major turning point in the novel.

Starting in chap. 10 ("The Corn-Leaf Devil Makes Mr. Fly's Wife Pregnant"), the figures of Catalina and Celestino become progressively more supernatural: she, a great witch; he, first a dwarf (chap. 11) and then a giant (chap. 12). At this point most of the human characters of Quiavicús and Tierrapaulita flee and make way for the wizards, witches, and spooks who haunt the last half of the novel. Celestino and Catalina – the great Gíroma – lose importance in part II and pass on their respective scepters to, first of all, the Christian and earth-born demons who fight each other over the question of man's destiny. Cashtoc, "the destroying demon of man and everything made by man, the enemy of life," wants to wipe out humans for their wish of singularizing themselves (134), while Candanga wants them to reproduce because "the more men, . . . the more men for hell" (174). The scepter is also handed over to Father Chimalpín who defies Candanga for daring to urge men to breed without love.

A set of characters loses importance as a new one comes to the fore. The narrative structure that has compelled so many critics to accuse *Hombres de maíz* of a lack of unity appears once again in *Mulata* and we can see how, in terms of characterization at least, both novels are conceived in two segments. As we have pointed out, the 1949 panegyric begins with a statement of the narrative problem (destruction of the land/retribution, chaps. I–IX) and continues with a close study of a Guatemalan peasant who reinstates order in the form of a patriarchal, agricultural community (chap. X and the epilogue). *Mulata* begins where *Hombres de maíz* leaves off, but with one major difference. The Indian couple at the end of the earlier novel perverts its values in the later work. The husband trades his wife for wealth and ends up empty-handed. The tale of their doom spans ten chapters up the point in which the corn-leaf devil makes Cata-

lina pregnant. In the remaining chapters the focus of importance shifts from human characters to supernatural ones, from Celestino and Catalina to the Mayan and Christian devils.

We have pointed out how Asturias is not vitally concerned with character development in his *neo-Indigenista* fiction; in fact, an important part of his narrative innovation consists of using his characters as vehicles subservient to the development of major themes. In *Hombres de maíz* man is rewarded in the person of Goyo; in *Mulata* he is collectively punished for his greed. But in order to make a comprehensive statement of punishment Asturias needs to translate the individual portrayal of the Yumis into a sweeping metaphor applicable to all humans. He decides to represent this universality in the archetypal passions inherent in all humans – good and evil.

As emblems of these instincts, he might have chosen to focus on God and the Devil, but he was writing a fable for modern man, not addressing our nineteenth-century ancestors. Life as he saw it was ruled by destructive passions that he seeks to explore by portraying an infernal kingdom on earth from a Mesoamerican perspective. Furthermore, in terms of a religious iconography he underplays neither the Christian nor the Indian beliefs that make up the cultural backbone of his country. A struggle between a Christian demon, Candanga, and a pagan one, Cashtoc, seems to him much more representative of his own civilization than the well-worn and more typically European match between heaven and hell. It is for this reason that two devils rule over the second half of the novel as the two wives rule over the first. In fact, the number two turns out to be almost as important to the development of *Mulata* as the number three had been to the conception of *Hombres de maíz*. The only cardinal virtue not present in this number is that although it implicitly suggests the idea of struggle, of comparison or contrast, it fails to offer an image of resolution. It turns out, however, that even this apparent shortcoming accommodates itself perfectly within the plot Asturias had in mind.

There is no relief, no resolution at the end of *Mulata*, simply an image of transformation (Chimalpín begins to become an elephant) and a rather cryptic song strongly suggesting the end of all desire (“I want nothing at all”) (307). But even when a resolution does not figure in his plans, the author of *Mulata*

must devise the means for bringing his sets of pairs together to effect transitions and propel the action forward. Since the novel has two clearly distinguished halves, he had to figure out how to relate the circumscribed lives of a peasant couple to the basic drives inherent in all men, especially when these drives are themselves portrayed as characters: Candanga, emblem of Eros, urges men to reproduce; Cashtoc, breeder of Death, dries up the liquor of life.

The transition between the tale of the sinful peasant who prefers gold to progeny and the symbolic portrayal of Eros and Death was made even more essential by the fact that, by pressing forward from the specific to the general, Asturias meant to articulate a universal condemnation of evil. He must have thought at this point of the *matryoshka*, those sets of Russian dolls that fit inside one another; it was this accordion principle of sorts that would provide the perfect image for his novel in progress. To bring together the individual (Yumí, the Mulata) and the general (the passions of evil), to join male and female, present (a peasant couple in modern-day Guatemala) and past (the folk traditions of Mesoamerica) was the masterstroke of his scheme.

To do it, he avails himself of a figure as old as the Bible and as crucial to Plato as it became, centuries later, to Rilke, Nietzsche, and Freud: He recasts the androgynous or hermaphroditic ideal in order to reunify Eros and the death instinct. The undifferentiated figure of hybrids, “neither male nor female, neither animals nor man, neither angels nor devils” presents itself to him as an unavoidable figuration of the synthesis he was searching for (*Mulata*, 200). As an incarnation of all he despised and condemned, he shapes the Mulata to house this ambivalence in her body. The fact that “she doesn’t have enough inky-dinky for a man and she has too much dinky-inky for a woman . . . isn’t a woman . . . but she isn’t a real man either” (53) is merely the first indication that Asturias casts her as an embodiment of the dualism represented by the poles of activity – Eros, the male, and Thanatos, the female, principle – traditionally at war with each other. The full nature of this war, however, does not become evident until part II, when Cashtoc faces Candanga in mortal combat.

The Mulata is two sexes in one and, as we have seen, barren to boot. Since double-sided units are seminal to the narrative development of this novel, Asturias chooses to establish a similar equation between sexual undifferentiation and barrenness in parts II and III. Tongue in cheek, he finds that other image of duality in a commonplace figure, the priest – male under the robe but, on the surface, costumed with “a woman’s skirts without anyone’s noticing that [he] was a male” (103). Portrayed as an ersatz male possessed by a woman and a demon, the holy man in skirts becomes not only the other emblem of polarity and sexual undifferentiation in the novel but also the bridge connecting the sadistic death wish (emblematic of Cashtoc) with the masochistic “suicidal furor” characteristic of the Mulata (46). In him, the hybrid gargoyle who feels “his virility empty” (200), both destructive instincts are housed in a perverted parody of the Trinity. Jerónimo the sexton is penetrated by the Mulata, symbol of impotence. She, scourge of the unborn, is filled by Cashtoc, slayer of the living. Tarnished by her own transgression and by that of the demon who inhabits her, the Mulata injects a conjugate stigma – infanticide and butchery – into the body of the “feminoid” who blatantly reflects it in his own name: Jerónimo de la Degollación de los Santos Inocentes (200). Homosexuality is cast thereafter as symbol of barrenness. And because the homosexual loves an image like his own (and this image translates in the case of Jerónimo and the Mulata as a synthesis between Eros and Death), Asturias paints a second coat on his figurative portrayal of the instincts by having the “feminine sex . . . sex . . . sexton” fall in love with Yumí, possessed by the Christian demon Candanga (197).

As all else in the novel, Candanga is not what he seems. He urges men and women to breed and proclaims, to all appearances, the need to reproduce. But let not the reader forget for an instant that real men, “the ones made out of corn, have stopped existing in reality and have become fictitious creatures since they did not live for the community” (173). Candanga aims to change Tierrapaulita into a “people factory” so that he can have fuel to feed his “opulent ovens” (243) and the carnal flame that he lights in the body of man, as it turns out, “breeds nothing but ashes” (244). His “fallacious shout: ‘Breeding

tiiime! Breeding tiiiime!" does not inspire love but, rather, "the adhesion of body to body, with a clutching at the bestial act" (244). The new breed of fictitious creatures does not make love because it has no love to make. Love is dead and, in this novel, at least, comes to signify death.

What the Christian demon is actually promoting is a race of puppets, their lives in every way a denial of the communal spirit. In fact, Candanga's curse cancels the most distinguishing feature of the human animal: the ability to communicate whether through body or mind. The bestial act the Christian Devil incites yields "dust," not flesh. It is because this intent is not evident from his fallacious shout that he at first baffles Chimalpín as they face each other in another of the struggles that typify *Mulata*.

In parts II and III the three orders – human, celestial, and demonic – confront each other. The *Mulata* battles Yumí; the Mayan demon under her skin attacks the not-so-heavenly Celestino; the Christian church opposes the Christian demon, who proclaims its own "divine mandate to increase and multiply" (244). In the beginning, Father Chimalpín thinks that Candanga's shout cannot be "entirely demoniacal" because it urges man to propagate. It turns out, however, that Candanga's propagation has little to do with Christian love. "A person is a Christian because it implies loving more, loving more is giving one's self more, is reaching, through that giving, everything that surrounds us" (244), whereas Celestino, the Great Giroma, the *Mulata*, and all the Tierrapaulitans live and lust after selfishness and selfishness alone. Chimalpín, the only preacher of love in the novel, must fight Cashtoc, minister of death. Typically, the battle takes on the appearance of a sexual encounter, a ritual of production parodied as much by its form as by its outcome.

The skirted female shape of the priest is transformed into a giant cassocked spider with eleven thousand hairy legs, while Cashtoc, housed in Yumí, becomes a ferocious hedgehog with erect quills (210). The battle of the forces of life against those of death takes place on the ceiling of a church, a setting as inverted as the topsy-turvy logic that rules all pairings in the novel. The contestants are eventually paralyzed by a blinding fog, but the profound significance of their match does not

escape Degollación, who runs up to the belfry to send the bells flying for Easter Sunday and begins instead, "to ring for a Requiem mass for the accursed souls of that accursed hell of Tierrapaulita" (211). After all, we are told, if God and hope are dead, "how could anyone give life that night?" (206).

Freed from his duel with Candanga, the spider, dressed in a black chasuble, scurries along to celebrate a mass for the dead to join in unholy matrimony the Mulata, dressed as a dead bride, and her porcupine husband, Celestino Yumí (211). The ceremony culminates with her multiple impalement on the "huggle-snuggle" of her amorous husband, "the marital beast who did not soften his spines, but made them harder and sharper" (212). And yet, their embrace of love and death is hardly as pernicious as the fact that the priest, the only remaining stronghold of agape in the novel, becomes tainted as well by his ceremonial involvement with the Reaper. The morning after the requiem wedding, Chimalpín awakens covered with the same pockmarks that scar Celestino's body. It looks "as if he even got [them] under [his] skin" (249). He feels prone to decompose, like the "slaves bathed in the pus of Caliban" (250). His skin, impenetrable in times gone by, is now full of holes from which his grief pours out. Two remedies may cure him: to ride on a Meat-Eating Mule one dark night or "to go to bed with a virgin who has a rash, so that in the jiggling of love his bites would fall off, and her rash would go away in blood" (271).

This second drastic remedy seizes the sexton's deviant imagination. From the thought of carnal sin alone, his spine lengthens "down to his heels, like a diabolic tail" (278). He abandons Chimalpín in order to satisfy his own lust and jumps naked into bed to wait for the pockmarked virgin. At this point, the reader cannot help being reminded of a much earlier scene in part I titled, "An Agreement to Trade Is Never Unmade," in which an intern also goes to bed with a smallpox victim. I have already said how the number two (and, accordingly, pairs and pendants of all sorts) is a typical figuration of *Mulata*. This scene is no exception; Chimalpín's necrophilia becomes clear only in the light of the coded reference to the earlier chapter. To emphasize that both scenes must be read as a pair, Asturias mirrors their position within the narrative architecture: "An Agreement to

Trade" is the second chapter from the beginning; "The Virgin with a Rash," the second from the end.²⁴

In the earlier instance, the man in bed with a smallpox victim discovers "he had been sleeping in the arms of a dead woman, scabby soaked in pus and blood" (18). He is sick at heart, sicker in body by the squalid nature of his prurience, but cannot flee from the death wish that is the curse of all characters in *Mulata*. To cleanse himself from the grip of death he runs to a river of ashes but "while he was bathing, scrubbing himself with strong soap and sand . . . they shouted warnings to him because the sewage from the San Lázaro Asylum where the lepers were flowed into the river" (18).

The allure of sex is likewise transformed into the firm grasp of its counterpole for Jerónimo the sexton. He is helplessly drawn to the woman with a rash until, once in bed, he "feels his body floating in a liquid absence of everything" (287). To the denial of life explicit in the disownment of his own person (his body "did not exist") corresponds the suppression of sexuality immanent in the pustulate virgin (287). Like the *Mulata* and all women in the novel with the possible exception of Catalina, the virgin is mere counterfeit, a manikin "of weightless wood" who is replaced in bed by a "true serpent" (288). "That disgusting house reptile that ate rats, spiders" stares at Jerónimo "with the look of a naked woman" (288) until it finally forces him to jump out the window, half crazed, like the intern who flees to the capital after his love scene with death, "his eyes popping out, a madman ready for the asylum" (18).

Clearly, then, eroticism in *Mulata* serves to kindle the flames of extinction. It is dirty and violent and leads to madness and death. The association between barrenness, filth, and decay primordial to Asturias's scheme is nowhere more evident than in the tale of Granny Soot's zoophilia in part I, chap. II. Not only does the old woman live surrounded by grime (which she emblemizes in her own name), she unleashes her sterile passion by keeping her many dogs hungry and anointing her body with the leftovers from her meal

so that some would lick her teats, others her belly, others her legs, others her buttocks, others her back, and the most lustful her parts, sprinkling her with their urine, their red organs sticking out, somewhere between being devoured and being kissed. (120)

Granny Soot's nightly ritual is only one of the many instances in which feculence and eroticism are brought together in *Mulata*. In fact, it is not surprising that Asturias should ascribe importance to the role of coprophilia and by extension (since excremental things are intimately bound up with sexual things) to that of sodomy because, as psychoanalytic theory points out, aggression, the death wish, and anal organization are all interconnected (Freud, *Collected Papers*, II, 45-50, 164-171). The *Mulata*, we remember, only offers Celestino her backside; she "never consented to turn over and face him," just like her counterpart, the moon goddess in Mayan mythology (41). Later in the novel, when Yumí's corncribs appear full of kernels of gold and the naked, "bestial and moonlike" *Mulata* is pursued by her husband's workmen, she wields the "lead-red and tightest ring of Saturn" of "her double sex, without love, with hatred" as her weapon (45). Fronted by her aggressive rear the blinded males refuse her body and become "a Milky Way of breeding stallions who rolled, who bit each other, who kicked, ejaculating by themselves, vertebrates like waves of the sea, bodies falling into the emptiness" (45).

Both the curse of sterility and its link with squalor carry over to the second part of the novel. Jerónimo de la Degollación, possessed by the *Mulata*, feels "more feminoid, more of a sodomite" (200). Like his succubus and alter ego from part I, he is a barren pursuer of death in the form of the virulent body of the virgin with a rash. The message portrayed by the *Mulata*, by Jerónimo, and by all sexual encounters in the novel is straightforward enough: Intercourse never leads to propagation because man, historical man, has more love for gold than for his fellow beings. Asturias translates greed into a barren passion. The lust for lucre, he suggests, blinds individuals to the most essential thing in life: communication. That is why *Mulata* concludes with "a total muteness . . . of what is communication, tongue, language, speech, song, noise" (305). Characters strut and fret across the pages of the novel, their ability to reproduce stripped away, their contacts meager and infecund. The Ship of Fools on which they sail is propelled by an overriding death drive translated into an erotic energy that systematically transgresses the notion of reproduction, a fundamental tenet of the social contract. When they are heard of no more –

on the desolate landscape drawn by Asturias – there only glimmers, with “magic splendor,” Yumi’s skeleton, reputedly of solid gold. Glimmers or, more likely, *seems* to glimmer, since, as the Devil warns Celestino, “it is better to hide the apparent than the real,” and Asturias, untiring alchemist of words, has not had his last concerning the severe limitations of this base metal (32).

Money doesn't smell

By 1963, Asturias had become a dedicated student of economic theory and psychoanalysis, interests that evolved from and complemented his apprenticeship in sociology and anthropology. Surely the progression from Mauss and Bataille to Keynes and Marx was to be expected in a man for whom the laws of distribution and the nature of exchange had been central concerns since his days at the university. His intellectual curiosity in psychoanalysis was a more recent development, however. The fall of Arbenz and ensuing disappointment in the face of founded aspirations steers Asturias in the direction of personal inquiry and psychological motivation. Not surprisingly, these interests were ministered to by his own difficulties and the professional help he had to seek out, years before he was to start work on *Mulata*.

It all began in 1948, at the time of his first diplomatic appointment in Buenos Aires when the author of the recently published *El señor presidente* takes the Argentinian capital by storm. The first reason for his newly found acclaim is the publication of his first novel by Losada in 1948 (barely two years after the Costa Amic edition sees the light in Mexico). The second makes Asturias more notorious than famous. During his stint at the embassy he startles the always urbane *porteños* with his frequent and rather spectacular bouts of drinking. In her informative biography, Jimena Sáenz describes how Asturias would climb on the tables of the fashionable Richmond, on the calle Florida, following a pattern that had started during his sojourn in Mexico City.

Fortunately for Asturias, soon after the first public scandals he falls into the hands of Simeón Falicoff, an analyst “who did not charge writers and artists because he respected their talent”

(Sáenz, 122). Falicoff sent Asturias to a sanatorium where he was completely cured from alcoholism after two months. But disturbing events of the previous few years had deeply scarred the author and could not be eradicated with the same expediency. After the author's stormy marriage to Clemencia Amado ended in 1947, he became temporarily estranged from his two sons, Rodrigo and Miguel Angel, and less than a year later, in May 1948, he lost his mother.

Personal grief was compounded in the years that followed by the changing tide of events in his home country: The government he supported foundered; a man he greatly admired resigned. Asturias followed him into exile, an exile that would bring him around once again to his beloved Argentina and to the constructive counsel of Simeón Falicoff. We are talking about two very distinct periods in the author's life but we will see how they mesh – in terms of his attitude and of the background he was acquiring – when the time comes to write *Mulata*.

In the most detailed and lucid book on Asturias published to date, Gerald Martin directs our thoughts to the author's need for psychoanalytic care during the period immediately following "the complex relationship with his mother and first wife" (*O.C.*, IV, lxix, note 66). Martin also notes that Falicoff followed a Jungian approach because this analyst has always "been studied with great interest in the Argentinian capital" (lxx, note 66). There is no doubt that Asturias did come in contact with Jung's writing, a fact that can be gleaned from the first Asturian novel to appear in print during his diplomatic appointment in Buenos Aires (*Hombres de maíz*, published by Losada in 1949). But, as were most of the Argentinian psychoanalysts of the period, Falicoff was also schooled in the teachings and methods of the Freudian school. And it is most distinctly these that come across in *Mulata*, a novel impossible to understand without grasping the anal symbolic complex discussed by Freud in his *Collected Papers* (II, 164–171; Abraham, *Selected Papers*, 379–381). It is from the correlation between money and feces put forward by the Viennese that the otherwise obscure development of Asturias's scatological farce originates.

After the fall of Arbenz, Asturias felt very strongly that the desire for money had taken the place of all genuinely human

needs. Worse yet: money not as an end unto itself. In a mercantile economy – modern-day Guatemala was a case in point – wealth allows individuals to stake claims on the labor of others and functions in every way as an emblem of power and an instrument for control. More than any other passion, greed, born out of a desire to accumulate, betokens an evolution from the collective state where power is distributed among all members of the community to individualism, signpost of the demonic forces that have come to the fore in the modern age.

Asturias satirizes the desire for money in Celestino's barren passion by illustrating how the accumulation of wealth is really the impoverishment of human nature. The greedy peasant trades Catalina and loses his home, his hope, and ultimately his life. Nowhere in the novel is there a sign of fertility or growth. Corruption, decay, and, more specifically, a scatological fixation hold sway. There are actually fifty-six straightforward references to the excretory functions in *Mulata*, most of them directly connected to the overall economy of the novel – the contrast between accumulation and expenditure.²⁵ Asturias uses grossly anal imagery to denounce his opponents, but this imagery should not be simply dismissed as vulgar abuse. The scatological fixation in this instance reveals the anality screened behind the sublimation, an anality that, along with its correlative rejection, is capital in understanding the fiction. But let us proceed from the beginning, that is to say, from the more sublimated level, in order to demonstrate how gold, excrement, and the Devil are the three pinions supporting the thematic development of *Mulata de tal*.

Wealth, as we have seen, is the obsession of all characters in this saga on the theme of human greed. It is a subject on which no one is likely to mince words: "And what a person won't do to get rich," reasons Celestino: "Steal, kill, assault, rob, everything that work will not produce in order to get good land, good cattle, fine horses" (22). The lure of gold beckons at every step of part I and yet, despite its haunting presence, it is not really the main issue in Asturias's allegory but, rather, the most visible manifestation of an underlying cancer. After all, property – communal property, that is – had been praised in the epilogue of *Hombres de maíz*. The problem in *Mulata* is that men want to have and to hold. Sharing is out of the question, which is why,

in the author's own words, those who "exploit the working man, ranchers, coffee growers, plantation owners" are really "stuff[ing] themselves on human flesh" (34).

As described thus far, Asturias's narrative scheme might appear simplistic, a mere diatribe against greed and just another political tract. What makes it art and a masterpiece is the metaphoric dimension with which he envelops it, one whose understanding can be greatly facilitated in the light of Norman O. Brown's exemplary exegesis on Freud.²⁶ "The category of property," argues Brown, "is not simply transferred from feces to money; on the contrary, money is feces, because the anal eroticism continues in the unconscious. The anal eroticism has not been renounced or abandoned," he concludes, "but repressed" (191).

Asturias's masterstroke consists in lifting the veil from what Brown terms "dehydrated filth" in order to reveal the anality that hides beneath it. The impulse to reveal what money is symbolically screening would even explain the bipartite structure of *Mulata*. The action of this novel unfolds, first of all, as an allegory of repression in which the characters' love of lucre plays the dominant role. It is through the poignant depiction of greed that Asturias can best demonstrate its inanity in the second part (chap. IX to the end of the novel) where he revels in the personification of the Devil, his dominion, and the explicit anality he unleashes.

Using Freud's analogy of love and excrement as a model, the Guatemalan author contrives a shrewd syllogism as a frame for his work. His point of departure is man's love of money, money that Asturias skillfully assimilates to the "dry corn leaves" which "will turn into bills of a hundred, five hundred, and a thousand pesos" (15). But the dry corn leaves are also, metonymically, the Indian devil ("Tazol is dry corn leaves" [15]). If he wants money, Celestino must bring home corn leaves or, in other words, bring home the devil: "Tazol is dry corn leaves and dry corn leaves you shall bring home, all that you can, and all those corn leaves, all that Tazol, will turn into bills" (15).

This syllogism is merely the outer layer of Asturias's scheme; the masterstroke that puts the finishing touch on his cunning plot is the assimilation of the dry corn leaf to refuse by which he means no ordinary chaff but, specifically, "the waste

product of that beautiful creature formed out of the flesh of the ears" (31–32) – the same beautiful creature, in other words, who was the subject of his first *neo-Indigenista* novel (i.e., maize). The bond between Tazol and waste matter cannot be underestimated; it serves Asturias a double purpose and structures his entire narrative. It allows him to depict man's alienated consciousness – his "valuation of things and devaluation of the human body" (Brown, 238) – and provides him with a measure of contrast for his two masterpieces inspired by Indian tradition. The epilogue of the earlier one had sung the praises of the "beautiful creature" made of maize and highlighted the bond between maize and rebirth; the later work focuses not on the "flesh of the ears" but on the dry leaf and uses it (and the demon who embodies it) as correlative with the money economy that has impoverished human nature by taking the place of genuine human needs.

Man covets money, money that Tazol (the dry corn leaf) represents. Therefore, man has bred a vicious need for the Devil and dehumanized his own urges, all in order to worship false gods. Stated otherwise, humanity has turned its back on the pleasure principle and allowed its antithesis, the death instinct, to become master of the house. Such transposition explains why Asturias eroticizes death and why the protagonists strive to tear each other to pieces with a "raging need to destroy" (43). It also allows us to understand the widespread curse of sterility as well as the association between sex and the abject, of paramount importance because it bolsters in so many ways the whole narrative edifice.

Not surprisingly (considering the influence of Mauss and Bataille on Asturias's narrative conception), the bond between sex and the abject springs from the conflation of sacred and profane starting with the opening scene when Celestino Yumí visits the fair of San Martín Chile Verde.²⁷ At the fair the hero is accused of being a "leper" and a "pig" because, urged by the Devil, he struts around with his "prodigious fly" open and "induces women to sin" (3). Celestino enters the church at High Mass and begins "rubbing his front against the crowd of women" who give off "a smell of greased hair . . . of dripping armpits, smells that blended well with the aroma of the incense, the holy water, the floral decorations," smells that are fully in

keeping with the atmosphere and ritual of a church, in other words (4). Also, not surprising in view of Asturias's master plan, the association between sacred and profane becomes flagrantly scatological in two later episodes.

In the first (which takes place in a chapter entitled "Devils Here, Devils There Stop and Hang Up in the Air"), the priest of Tierrapaulita attempts to smuggle holy water into his demon-infested town. He conceives the idea of injecting the holy water into coconuts to escape the Devil's vigilance. This scheme is discovered by Candanga, the demon of traditional Indian lore, who is violently opposed to the religion and ways of the white man. The coconuts sit in the cloister waiting to be secreted into the church when, all of a sudden, out of each one, "through something feminine that cannot be seen without sinning, the water was pouring out and wetting the floor" (146). The priest is dumbstruck by this "diabolical nightmare," terrified when the sexton explains that "the water cannot be holy because the coconuts have been transformed into women taking a leak" (146), and begins hacking away on the spot at the "dirty sows who came to piss in the cloister" (146).

The association between sacred and profane, between sexuality and excretion that is so blatant in this scene becomes more elaborately perverse and, at the same time, more distinguishably transparent in a subsequent, three-part episode enacted in the same Tierrapaulitan church. In the first leaf of this triptych, the town druggist and great devotee of the Bad Thief who was crucified alongside Christ on the Mount of Olives comes to pay his respects in a most curious, if not at all surprising, manner. He takes out a sponge and a "cathartic paste . . . to help (the saint) defecate, because in the statue he was portrayed . . . as a dry-belly man, a graduate in constipation" (203). The druggist's attention is suddenly drawn away from "Saint Badthief" and toward a gigantic spider drinking the holy water and, soon after, to the formidable fight between this fabulous insect and a hedgehog who turns out to be Yumí, metamorphosed through the agency of the earth-born devils. The entire episode is rife with references to excretion and mutilation ("beheading" [205, 207]; "despoiling Yumí of his male attributes" [210]; snatching away the Mulata's "trap with little lizard holes," i.e., her sex [214]). An entire subtext develops as a

performed evocation of the legendary order of the Chamber-Potters or "walking urinals" who used to parade at balls given by the nobility at the time of the colony (208). The height of courtesy at these occasions, explains Jerónimo de la Degollación, was to circulate Chamber-Potters "under whose black capes ladies of quality could urinate silently" (207), a fashion that continued until their chief was sentenced to be burned at the stake "for having sustained that the Earth relieved herself of her pregnant urine into the sea that received her river with her Chamber-Potter's basin" (209).

The three-part episode concludes with a mass for the dead sung by the "spider dressed in a black chasuble" as it elevates "the dead host, the unconsecrated host . . . while in the front . . . facing the main altar . . . that Requiem Mass was being heard by the certain Mulata, dressed as a dead bride, and Celestino Yumí . . . corporeally present as a porcupine" (242). The ceremony comes to a climax in a scene already referred to, one in which Celestino buries "all his needles of delight in her dark flesh, right there in the church, during the wedding Mass that was a funeral," while, at the same moment, the empty streets outside ring with the shout of "Breedingtime-today!" (243).

Scenes like this one, read without the proper background, have done a great deal of harm to Asturias's reputation. They seem disorganized or at best arbitrary in their depiction of natural and unnatural phenomena: priests who become spiders, saints who defecate, Chamber-Potters who stroll around in black capes. The truth of the matter is that they were orchestrated with great care but conceived like crossword puzzles: Each piece has its proper meaning only when read within the context of its rightful place.

We know that Asturias makes no concessions in his *neo-Indigenista* allegories; he writes what he feels "without worrying whether the reader was going to understand or not" (quoted in Sáenz, 124). There is no doubt that he was an ingenious allegorist but, unfortunately, one who wrote resourceful tonal poems for which no one knew the scales. It is not his fault that they didn't and he should not be blamed for writing complex and seemingly hermetic works of art. He wrote what he felt and chose allegory as the means to extemporize it. His precedes-

sors – Swift, Rabelais, and Quevedo, for instance – might seem as opaque (or as shallow) after a cursory reading, but critics have been more intrigued or more inspired by these European satirists than by their Guatemalan counterpart.

What must be kept in mind when reading *Mulata* is that Asturias was bursting with rage at the time he conceived it. In the sixteen years preceding the publication of this novel, he had divorced his first wife, lost his mother, separated from his sons, exiled in Argentina, and forced to leave his new home after being arrested “by mistake” during Guido’s government. It is true, on the other hand, that he had found a lifelong companion and collaborator, not to mention profound understanding and complicity, in the Argentinian Blanca Mora y Araujo, whom he marries in 1950.

In addition to love, he had begun to receive widespread international recognition for his literary work. In 1952, *El señor presidente* wins the International French Book Award; ten years later, in 1962, it is awarded the coveted William Faulkner Foundation prize. Love and recognition did much to soothe Asturias’s battered wounds during this period, but the best cure for the rejection and acute alienation that typify this period in his life was his own transformation of excruciatingly emotional material into fiction.

Mulata, it should be obvious by now, is a potboiler whose content is not sex, but anger, anger at the loss of family, country, and political ideals. This is why it should be read as an allegory of states of being, of psychological impulses. This explains in turn why it is so blatantly scatological, since rejection, as we know from Freud, is part and parcel of the anal complex (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 50). Asturias was well aware of the importance psychoanalysis attributes to the pleasure of separation, a pleasure that becomes firmly entrenched during the anal stage. The moment of discharge is seen by Freud as a sally against all bodies, including those of the parents and even one’s own; in other words, as a primary aggression focused on others (sadism) or on the self (masochism).

By putting such emphasis on psychoanalytic theory it might seem that we stray from our subject when, actually, we aim at the heart of it. Asturias learned as much from studying Freud as he had at Hautes Études from Georges Raynaud (this

becomes amply evident when we read his newspaper articles from the first Paris period, as, for instance, his illuminating "La arquitectura de la vida nueva (I)" [*Periodismo*, 254–258]). Where Asturias's conscious control of Freud's theses ends, and where the textual expression of drives beyond his control begins, no one can ascertain. Whether or not he was conscious of the psychoanalytic implications of all the material he was handling in *Mulata* does not invalidate a Freudian interpretation of his novel, however, especially when we consider that the action in this instance does not mirror reality but, rather, as we shall see, the emotional state of its author. This point cannot be sufficiently overstated. Asturias writes an allegory of rejection and develops this feature through a good many of its ramifications according to psychoanalysis – from castration anxiety to a scatological fixation – without ever forgetting to make transparent the link between gold and feces, between anality, the devil, and the color black. Herein lies the entire backbone of this obscure, complex, disturbing novel. It is only after we grasp this that we can journey from the consequence to the source, from the portrayal of aggression to the anality from which it stems.

A scatological allegory, this humble tale about a peasant who makes a pact with the Devil? It is so easy to be deluded by the more or less straightforward prose and mimetic story line of the first nine chapters. But the further we read, the murkier the action becomes. Finally, all traces of character and chronological development are obliterated. Celestino and Catalina lose their names, their shape, their identity. Events do not follow each other in logical sequence. The reader cannot help but wonder why such changes of style, of focus, of character. Why are the eight chapters about Celestino's dealings with Tazol followed by eight others about the Yumis' transformation into great sorcerers? After which point all hell breaks loose. Literally.

By the time we reach part I, chap. 17, "The Battle of the Heads," the action is in the hands of devils, Christian as well as Indian. The protagonists of part I reappear in part II, chap. III, but are possessed by opposing demons, and from that point on they are cut in pieces, struck by lightning, and even bounced off a meat-eating mule until they finally disappear from the face of the earth, if earth is indeed the realm por-

trayed in this fable. Have we here, then, a book ruled by the same disorder that early critics of *Hombres de maíz* saw in that novel? Have we here only bits and pieces of foundering folktales mistakenly labeled, clumsily strung together?

The answer is obviously no. What we do have is a thoroughly unconventional structuring principle, one based on thematic associations stemming out of a morbid trinity in which the devil, anality, and the death instinct hold hands in a carnivalesque rapture where all conventions are overturned. Readers must not be deluded by baroque trappings and apparent confusion; nothing is gratuitous in a well-executed work of art. The devil in *Mulata* is no exception, of course, although readers may tend to shortchange Asturias by perceiving the former's role merely at face value, as the lineal descendant of the Trickster and culture-hero type transposed to a Mesoamerican context. But, as is always the case with this author's *neo-Indigenismo*, we must step beyond mere representation in order to grasp the full tenor of his artistic intention.

Throughout most of Asturias's allegory the devil behaves as "a projection of the psychological forces sustaining the economic activity of primitive peoples" (Brown, 220). He emblemizes greed and arouses this passion in the unwary Celestino. The *Mulata* is his toy and his creation, her golden back a metonymy of the metal she represents and he dispenses at will. Through him and the power he exerts, Asturias condemns the essentially satanic character of commerce as well as the general trend toward acquisitiveness and conspicuous consumption.²⁸ It is extremely tempting, let alone useful, for the Guatemalan author to diabolize the vices, simply because his condemnation is ethical and not religious, which means that he translates or transforms usury into a devil rather than a sin. But the devil, be it imp or fallen angel, is only an archetype of psychological forces that lurk within man.

Following Freud, Brown has emphasized the oedipal aspect of the Devil, his status as a father substitute (*CP*, IV, 436-472; Jones, *On the Nightmare*, 154-189), as well as his "persistently anal character" (207). This last feature is pandemic in literature from the High Middle Ages (Dante) to the present day (John Updike's *The Wives of Ipswich*, for example) and blatantly obvious in religious iconography of which Hyeronimus Bosch's hell

panel (in which souls pass out of Satan's anus before dropping into the black pit below) is a case in point. Asturias's portrayal of the Trickster figure in his novel is fully in keeping with this long-standing tradition.

For instance, when the Yumis trap Tazol in a cross of woven corn leaf hung around Catalina's neck, he makes her pregnant through the navel (I, 10). Soon after, when she feels gas in her stomach and gets ready to "let loose what it was," she discovers that "the heir of Tazol, whom she was carrying in her belly, was talking to her from between her buttocks, with a compressed voice, as if he could not express himself well between those enormous cheeks that were inseparable because they were so fat" (130). The homology between the devil and excrement is further underscored when Tazolito informs his mother that he will come out of her stomach "like this wind" (130) and, later in the action, when the priest of Tierrapaulita declares that Cash-toc trails a stench "of powder farts" (194) or that "a demonized can feel the spirit that possesses him like an immense belch, air that he cannot expel, either above or below" (223).

Using this homology as a point of articulation, Asturias extends and develops the semantic field played by the devil to embrace the color black and, by extension, filth and decay. This coupling system not only ties together all supernatural creatures in the novel (the Huasanga begins her sex-snatching career after being dropped in a cesspool containing "mud, garbage, small shadows of a toad . . . angry flies, hungry pigs" (151), whereas the "pestilential devil," Tipumal, floats in pools of "sulfurous water that stank like rotten eggs" [254]); it also links them with minor characters whose function is to illustrate, as in a moral fable or illuminated manuscript, a given vice or a particular fixation without necessarily advancing the narrative development. This is, for instance, the role of the Chamber-Potters (who always wear black and spend their lives opening up "the bottom of their encaped darkness" [237]); it is, likewise, the role of Granny Soot, who lives among "long-tailed rats" and dogs who sprinkle her "with their urine" (139).

On the basis of these clusters of associations it quickly becomes evident that *Mulata* unfolds more as a musical composition – one in which themes and variations play a major role – than as a work of literature with a linear development

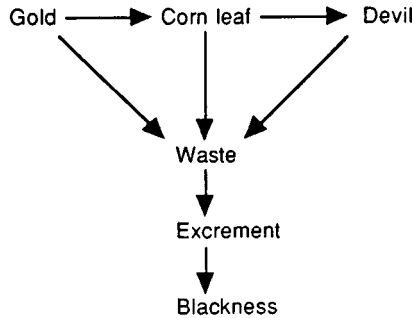


Figure 3.1. Nexus between the anal complex and the corn leaf in *Mulata de tal*

contingent on causality. I will be more explicit. We have already seen how gold is associated with the corn leaf and the corn leaf is linked with the devil. We then showed how gold, corn, and the devil have a connection with waste and, further, with excrement. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, excrement is in turn coupled with blackness and filth in Asturias's portrayal of the anal complex, a portrayal that predetermines the pervasive role of mutilation in the allegory. This, in a nutshell, is the backbone of *Mulata*. The pact with the devil is the overture, the transformation of peasants into great sorcerers the first movement, and the duel between devils and priests the second and third. But the building material that bonds these movements together and procures the flow from one section to the next are the thematic clusters for which the anal complex calls the tune.

In one of his more felicitous remarks, Robert Adams has pointed out that some of the greatest literary works of the twentieth century have a downright tumular or dunghill quality because they are confected from scraps, from literary and cultural debris (*Bad Mouth*, 122ff.). What makes *Mulata* stand out even among these blood relatives is that Asturias's *bricolage* is no accumulation for accumulation's sake, no congress of bits and pieces nursing an ambition to present hoarding as its aesthetic message. Tumular literature (Sarduy and Lezama Lima come immediately to mind) begets a conscious celebration of verbal holdings garnered in order to be treasured. Asturias's intention, on the other hand, is to hoard in order to lay waste. Why? Very simply to demonstrate the absolute worthlessness of greed.

His aesthetic intention must never be seen bereft of a political framework. He was attacking a society that had turned its back on communal life and enthroned privilege and egotism in its stead. How could he demonstrate that money is like excrement and selfish accumulation a waste if he did not first build a towerhouse of language that could be made to topple over revealing, in the process, "the inanity of being that we are"? (Bataille, *O.C.*, V, 108). This is why *Mulata* culminates in a stutter of disembodied phrases. Clearly, it is also the reason why its author seizes on the sadistic element typical of the anal phase to abrade the characters and events that he is creating.

Freud's double-pronged classification of man's instinctual portrait as a death drive and a sexual drive was particularly useful to the author of *Mulata*. Through the former, he knew, life aims to return "to the peace of the inorganic world," whereas through the latter, man perpetually strives for and brings about "the renewal of life" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 57). By negating the possibility to reproduce from his characters, who are all sterile except for the Indian devil, Asturias orchestrates the action of his novel to the tune of extinction (or, in other words, of the death drive) starting with the *Mulata*'s "raging need to destroy" (55) and culminating in a scene where she is torn to pieces for having surrendered to the Christian Devil (part II, chaps. 5 and 6).

When thousands of voices demand her dismemberment in the Cave of Flints because "if the Christian Devil had appropriated the moon, where would the witches and wizards, the sorcerers, the herbalists, the enchanters go?" Asturias's message rings clear (244). He bemoans the demise of indigenous traditions, fallen prey to extraneous influences. The *Mulata*, guilty of submitting to "foreign devils," is cut in pieces "like a snake" (246); she succumbs, as do all characters who fail to recognize the traditional importance of the communal spirit.

When I say "succumb," I mean that characters are consumed by having their integrity—their sense of oneness—undermined. This feature adds layers of complexity to the already intricate development because characters are not merely fragmented but change names and identities as well. At one point, as we have seen, Yumí starts referring to himself as José Quiquín (193), only to claim soon after that his name is Blas Pirir (199) or Domingo Tuy (199), "Diego Zim, Santos Chac,

Pancho Tojonabales, Chilano Camul" (205). Later in the action he is transformed into the dwarf Chiltic, then into a giant, a chicken, and finally a hedgehog.²⁹ He is possessed by "the demon of heaven" (193) and "quartered" by the Mulata during the final holocaust because she wants to get her hands on his skeleton (reputedly of hard gold, although, it turns out, this too is "pure legend" [304]).

All characters undergo a similar process of fragmentation; the sexton has his right arm yanked off, the great Giroma (i.e., Catalina Zabala) and the Mulata have their sex torn from their bodies, and the latter ends up "one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged" while her dismembered half, "now a breast, now a foot, now a buttock, now an arm," floats around in a "bluish pool" taunting the by then paralyzed Celestino with its unattainability (216). The reader, too, is taunted with this relentless loss of character unity, so pandemic that it prompts Yumí to ponder, "Can men be truth, perhaps? . . . Can things be truth, perhaps, is what we do certain, perhaps?" (216).

Asturias takes three hundred pages to answer this question but does it in no uncertain terms. Man cannot *be* truth because he persists in living the lie of alien values, of a culture not his own. He cannot even be certain of his actions because he has lost, forfeited, given up the cultural framework that once provided a sense of identity. This is undoubtedly the case for the men and women of his fiction and, very possibly, for historical man as well, most particularly Guatemalans, incapable or unwilling to heed the message of the *Leyendas de Guatemala* and reinstate ancestral values. Men that cannot be truth cannot have immutable bodies or unwavering souls. It is in order to picture their multiformity that the author of *Mulata* revamps the art of characterization. How diametrically opposed to the heroes of the bourgeois novel are Celestino Yumí and Catalina Zabala. Certainly no one in Asturias's allegory is involved in "an infinite quest for self-knowledge on the basis of the obscure, heterogeneous reality which surrounds him" (Lukacs, 60). No one is even bothering to seek the kind of knowledge that is portrayed in all epics as "the destiny of a community" (Lukacs, 66). Instead, the so-called "community" is involved in this instance in a process of expenditure that, Bataille to the end, culminates with "nothing at all" (*Mulata*, 307). How can Asturias's characters seek self-knowledge when they are all intent upon

destruction, inexorably becoming "carrion without an odor," each involved in the unremitting battle between true love and lust for power (*Mulata*, 223)?

Is this the same battle, one wonders, that Freud translates at the instinctual level as a clash between Eros and Thanatos, between love and death? Actually, yes and no. Love and death are personified by Candanga and Chimalpín, but the characters of *Mulata* cannot possibly be torn between these instincts. The option is not given them because from the beginning of this allegory, love has been identified with its antithesis and reproduction stifled. Candanga wants men to breed, but Chimalpín will not allow animal lust to rule over the planet. As a result, the world described by Asturias is rapidly being overrun with armies of unborn creatures that leave "a sticky coating" on every available surface (297). No one will give them "human shape," however, "as long as Father Chimalpín is opposed [to breeding]" and he is opposed because he cannot condone communication without love (297).

It is in this rejection of life based on blind impulse that Chimalpín functions as the author's mouthpiece at the end of the novel. Not surprisingly, he is the only character to survive the final holocaust, although in a different guise, unrecognizable from his previous self, buried under a tough hide, "barely able to see" but still lending an ear to a world that rings with vicious images of destruction (306). A world shattered by disorder, sadism, and the death instinct, and yet, one that is also teeming with unbegotten life. Teeming to such a degree that one cannot help but wonder what Asturias had in mind.

Isn't it puzzling to see such emphasis on birth, breeding, and reproduction at the very moment that rampant destruction is being portrayed? What could be the meaning of the leitmotif "Breedingtime today" that reverberates through the crumbling streets of quake-ridden Tierrapaulita? Isn't it stating the obvious to claim that the central preoccupation of the concluding chapter (III, 3) is the return to a prenatal state before life? (Brown, 114-115) The question is, How does this entelechy of uncreated existence in a kingdom of death relate to the author's message? To answer it, we must once again turn to the two sources from which Asturias draws his inspiration.

From Vasconcelos, the author of *Mulata* borrows the idea of wiping out creation to start anew. In a curious mixture of religious fervor and aesthetic zeal the author of *Prometeo Vencedor* proposes to annihilate the body (with its legacy of greed, ambition and lust) and allow humanity to live for the spirit alone.³⁰ Asturias revamps this notion from his knowledge of Freud. The author of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* repeatedly argues that one effect of the incapacity to accept separation from the body of the mother and thus, individuality, is to eroticize death, in other words, to conceive a morbid wish to regress to the prenatal state before life and separation began.

As we have seen throughout this discussion, Asturias eroticizes death in every conceivable way: first, by making the *Mulata* and Cashtoc, "enemy of life," its incarnations (155); second, by having the hero drawn to both; and third, by bringing together the antithetical impulses in women such as the Huasanga, who returns from the dead to steal sex organs from the living (147), or the equally ruthless Siguana, Siguamonta, and Siguanaba, who, when not "smelling the drunkard's anal breath," poison their lovers "with a substance that blends into one the convulsions of love and those of death" [129]). Is it surprising, then, that Asturias should conclude his celebration of extinction by portraying a return to the prenatal state? After all, doesn't the novel develop as a series of vignettes whose subjects and/or moral teachings are always variations on the theme of death, figurations in writing of the traditional portrayal of *vanitas*? It is only when we recognize the author's design to portray the dominion of death in life that the episodes of his allegory become clear.

This is the case, for instance, with the otherwise obscure chapter that follows the *Mulata*'s dismemberment and loss of her sex organs (II, 5). The one remaining half of this character is paired off with a "human skeleton" whose skin is "like dry cow manure"; "just like sisters who might have been born together," the two manage to give the illusion of being one whole person (256). It is impossible not to see in this concord of opposites an allusion to regeneration in general (the half dead are fused to produce one whole living creature) and, at the same time, a more specific reference to the myth of the formation of mankind by bisection referred by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure*

Principle. Asturias suggests, after Freud, that in seeking to reunite itself with the death principle (which the "human skeleton" obviously represents), the *Mulata* (i.e., Eros) aims to reinstate a condition of primal unity, a moment when love and death were one.

It is this moment that is being portrayed across the pages of his novel, although Asturias's intentions are dramatically different from Freud's. A love that is death may well lead "to the peace of the inorganic world" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 83–84n.), but Asturias was neither willing nor ready to exalt this kind of peace even while depicting what visionaries such as Mumford and Spengler had vaticinated as the last stage of history. The kingdom of doom he pictures in the lowlands of Guatemala should not – must not – be read as a swan song to humanity. The empire of death and the devil depicted here is actually correlative to Asturias's eschatological hope in the transformation of life on earth, a belief that was no new development in his writings.

As early as July 1, 1929, in an article published in *El Imparcial*, the budding author of the *Leyendas* had stated his belief that death "is useful to the evolution of things, to simplify the world which would be chaotic, confused and impossible without it. Change is indispensable to the improvement of the species," he argues in this same article, "and death, the greatest grief, the supreme architect in the construction of life" ("la copa de cuasia y una conducta del dolor" [*Periodismo*, 359–362]).

Twenty-five years after writing this article, the fall of Arbenz and the suppression of his social and land reforms suggest to Asturias that humanity drags its heels at the possibility of establishing a communal society. In the face of a crumbling Utopia, he cannot explicitly affirm procreation. His characters can only succumb to the living death and pandemonium that the devil represents, a death extemporized through an allegory of the anal sadistic complex that allows him to bring together money, the maize leaf, and excrement.

Rejection of the kind of values that Celestino comes to share with his compadre Don Timo is categorical, and *Mulata* is the dramatization in fable form of this rejection. If what Asturias wanted was to exorcise a decrepit society, what better means to

portray his feelings than through an allegory from which negation, mutilation, and suppression are inextricable? He was undeniably angry and disappointed. But always, to the end of his life, he would remain an optimist who believed that renewal could spring from decay, that the old dying world would give birth to the new. The downward thrust depicted in *Mulata de tal* – with its focus on the bowels and on decay – should be seen as a cleansing gesture, the ubiquitous death throes as a force that kills while regenerating. “Happy are humans who are cut off by death when they get old, and are sown into the ground to come back to life again!” argues the author’s deputy in the novel (165).

In concluding his mordant satire, Asturias harks back once again to Mayan tradition, specifically to a fundamental concept of Mesoamerican mythology: life always issues from death (as allegorized, for example, in Hunahpu’s decapitation in the House of Bats where the god embodies the sprouting seed (*Popol Vuh*, part III, 143)). Clearly, the author’s condemnation of selfishness must be read as an ode to death, but we must keep in mind that the great leveler functions as a positive force capable of ridding humanity of the depraved values that stigmatize it. Death excises the present, which goes to say that Asturias celebrates destruction with a dual-faced image that breathes life into the future by actualizing the values and traditions of the past.

The world upside down

The notion of pregnant death, which is all-important in *Mulata*, typifies all forms of popular-festive merriment. In fact, this allegory contains all the basic ingredients of both carnival and carnivalesque literature from grotesque exaggeration to a generalized downward movement with an emphasis on the lower stratum. By this I don’t necessarily assume that Asturias was familiar with the work of Bakhtin, although this is by no means impossible. He was simply drawing on popular culture, on forms of ritual based on laughter and rebirth that are consecrated by tradition.

His complex allegory can be understood on many levels and from different perspectives, but one feature is consistent

throughout, and one does not need to be an exegete to perceive it: Clowning, costumes, and festivities meet the reader at every turn. In addition, that the narration should open with a fair scene (at San Martín Chile Verde) and culminate with a holocaust is far from fortuitous, as we shall see. It is only when we realize that the carnivalesque and its topsy-turvy logic are also sources of inspiration for *Mulata* that we can begin to understand why it is so difficult to grapple with this novel, to follow its meandering logic masquerading as chaos.

Traditional fiction builds on continuity and repetition. Language based on intersubjectively shared meanings constitutes the building blocks of discourse and communication for which, in Wittgenstein's phrase, "agreements in judgment" are required. In the case of *Mulata*, however, characters are multi-form and events seldom admissible, even though from a thematic perspective they are always perfectly logical. Because he seeks to destroy symbolically the forces of stasis – the church, logos, and the law – Asturias uses parody as a weapon. With it, he strikes against an ailing world and disfigures a genre emblematic of Western bourgeois culture. *Mulata* is not a novel but an antinovel in which the pretenses of the isolated individual who wants to perpetuate himself are derided.

This individual is Celestino Yumí, the poor fool who believes that gold will make him endure. The reader accompanies him during his precarious ascendance in Quiavicús (part I) and watches his eventual debasement, dethronement, and death (parts II and III). His demise is told in a series of *agons*, or debates, between the forces that allegorize in person and deed the power and culture of different periods: Candanga (Christian hell), Chimalpín (Christian heaven), and Cashtoc (Indian hell). These mirror in turn the three couples who confront each other in part I: Celestino and Tazol, Celestino and the Mulata, and Catalina and the Mulata.

In keeping with the novel's design, all of the scenes are presented in the aspect of a carnival or a show in a marketplace booth. On the first page alone, mention is made of three regional fairs in Guatemala: San Martín Chile Verde, San Andrés Milpas Altas, and San Antonio Palopó. At all of them Celestino Yumí shows up with an open fly "that fluttered like a tavern curtain, in search of one of those women who go around bear-

ing and say they are maidens, or, in more respectable terms, go around pairing and say they are laden!" (11) We are also told that "his prodigious fly" stays open "as if it had been put together with buttons made from dying with laughter bone" (11). From the onset, then, the fair is linked with three typically carnivalesque features: the sideshow (Yumi's "tavern curtain"), reproduction (the "laden" maidens), and laughter (specifically, mockery of death).

This last aspect might surprise many readers, unwilling or unable to recognize death's loyal companion in the novel. But, undeniably, laughter is a constant presence in these pages written by Asturias during the early 1960s. Cashtoc mocks man's weakness and inanity in the persons of Celestino and Catalina, just as their maker – the author – recasts folktales and popular humor with a flair worthy of Rabelais. For example, when Timoteo Teo Timoteo enjoins his old friend Celestino to close his fly, he voices his anger in the face of a behavior he can't understand.

The reason for going to a country fair, argues Timoteo, is very clear: "Everybody goes to show off the best he has" (4), while he, Celestino, only brings "his cage half open" (14). Becoming more explicit in his naiveté, the compadre adds that at the last fair held in San Martín, Quiavicús exhibited "an enormous potato" and "two huge ears of corn" but no one would look at them because as soon as they would see the name of the town on the booth they "would start to laugh because Quiavicús was where the clown with the open fly was from" (14). The clown with the open fly, one remembers, is also the clown with the "prodigious" fly, the well-endowed (and sterile) jester who becomes the most powerful man in town. His exhibitionism at San Martín is merely the first indication that the hero, in typical carnivalesque fashion, is about to overturn conventions and the establishment during a feast in which, we are told, "anything was allowed" (12).

The feast where anything was allowed is, of course, carnival: the time of transposition when the pauper becomes king and the king pauper, the feast where conventions topple, where nothing is what it seems. And because the first premise of *Mulata* is that nothing is as it should be, the illogical logically follows: Churches melt "in the blinding sun like a huge piece of

white marzipan" (12) and Celestino leaves the fair "riding a horse that seemed to emerge from his open fly" (13). In the face of some of the most farfetched imagery ever conceived by Asturias, some readers might even jump to the conclusion that the metaphoric language in this novel is another instance of the kind of surrealistic legerdemain so often imputed to this author. However, a careful and systematic study of the system of grotesque exaggeration in *Mulata* (specifically its obvious generative quality, its humorous and/or scatological emphasis) should convince even the most adamant canvasser of Asturias's surrealism-in-every-novel that the imagery here is completely different from the infecund and humorless symbolism of a novel like *El señor presidente*.

The truth of the matter is that although Asturias was drawn to grotesque imagery all his life, he ended up developing a very complex method for his creative "madness." The figures he uses in *Mulata* are not merely meant to startle the reader or to provide an "illumination" – a link with the unconscious – but, rather, to reveal the logic of carnival and the regenerative power latent in the havoc it celebrates. Asturias's narrative intent was to renew society; but how different this renewal from the one inflicted through despair in *El señor presidente*. Scatological imagery and descent into the lower stratum are present in both works of fiction (Angel Face's prison scene in chap. XLI, part III, for example), but the dire, doleful sadism is gone from the pages of the latter allegory. Wise, wilier, and a much better writer, Asturias concocts a scenario of such boundless eccentricity that he succeeds in palliating the portentous tone that characterizes (and so often weakens) a number of his more realistic diatribes, compelling the reader to take Gerald Martin's perspicuous observation – to the effect that the author of *Mulata* used to read and write "in a trance state" – at face value (*O.C.*, ccxliii).

There is no other explanation, farfetched as this may seem, for the qualitative leap between the Banana trilogy and the demon-ridden allegory. One cannot even describe this author's literary growth in terms of a stylistic evolution because the trilogy and *Week-end in Guatemala* are sandwiched between his two greatest novels, *Hombres* and *Mulata*, a fact that brings us back to Martin's trance theory with the one purpose of adding that

the catalyst that always inspired Asturias to produce works of the highest quality was the indigenous element, one that obviously gave him a great sense of freedom.

It is when he was not making concessions to the reader that he writes his best pages, pages that, not surprisingly, always have to do with transcending the limits, with breaking the fetters of language, convention, and genre. As is the case for his hero Celestino, there always dozed within Asturias a "well-mannered person" (14). What Timoteo Teo Timoteo fears for his friend – that some witch doctor "might be cancelling out his baptism" – can be said to apply just as readily to the author of *Mulata* (4). Asturias writes a novel in which baptism, the conventional veneer that Christianity and the white man's establishment represent, is repudiated; and in so doing, he opens the door to five typically carnivalesque features that capsize the "rational" symmetry of the law-abiding world: laughter, inversion, grotesque exaggeration, duality, and an emphasis on the lower body (be it hell or the bowels).

Even though *Mulata* is far from being a comedy, laughter is all-pervasive in its pages. Beginning with the visitors at the fair of San Martín Chile Verde and continuing with the inhabitants of Tierrapaulita and the demons that invade it, all characters poke fun at the ludicrousness of the human condition, at the paltriness of the vanity and greed that the hero represents. The image of Celestino is built on the spirit of the folkloric fool whose wonderings are contrary to reason, whose acts defy all norms of common sense. We laugh at him, but it is a laughter fraught with pain. The satire, true to its barbed intent, aims home, allegorizing in the fool what is most typical of human nature – with one telling difference: Asturias magnifies the nature of his image, making it both fantastic and grotesque. His panoply of distorted figures calls forth both the pleasure of recognition (characters are fairly mimetic in the first four chapters) and annoyance at the unfathomable, which are characteristic of the comic genre in general (Schneegans, 305). Schneegans goes on to distinguish between three categories of the comic – the clownish, the burlesque, and the grotesque – coinciding in every way with Asturias's narrative portrait when he argues that in the latter specific social phenomena are berated (305).

Mockery is a key ingredient of the corrosive arsenal characteristic of this literary genre, a feature that explains why *Mulata* is seldom funny in spite of its wit. Its author seeks to explore philosophical and moral ideas under cover of an unrestrained fantasy typical of the Menippea. He relies on laughter, but it is a laughter that rents asunder, a laughter that makes giants drop their teeth (272), one that bursts out through the Mulata's self-inflicted wounds, a "laughter made from drops of blood" (71). It is also a laughter that debases, one that brings characters down to the lower stratum through derision (the skeletal woman who is hitched to the Mulata laughs and laughs "unable to hold herself in, happy to find someone else more unfortunate than she" [335]) or through associations with death (the earth-born devils let out "hailstorms" of loud laughter when the Demon of Heaven mourns over the depopulation of Tierrapaulita [277]). Finally, and fully in keeping with the canons of carnival literature, laughter is consistently associated with excrement. For example, when Celestino suggests that his compadre Don Timo is jealous of him or, as he colorfully puts it, that the compadre strains himself when he sees him (*pujara al verlo pasar*, 63), "as if he had a pain in his stomach." Don Timo roars with laughter assuring him that, quite to the contrary, he has "already passed (him) out of his insides" (61).

As is always the case with carnival literature, it is because of the associations with debasement and decay that laughter regenerates. For example, the giants of Mayan tradition "drop teeth from laughing so much" but only so that "others would grow out, and others, and others, all for the same torrential laugh" (272). The old smile, the sinful city, the rotten passion must crumble in pieces before new ones can take their place. It is to bring about such renewal that the world of images is shaken up in *Mulata*, hung to die upside down, like the hero of the novel who attempts to commit suicide by tying the rope around his foot while sparing his neck (36).

Asturias inverts all conventions, subverts all sense of an order that cannot last. Wives offer their backside to their husbands and breed through the navel, dogs fly (139), devils blow "square farts" (129), and women "love with thorns" (129). The break with natural laws reaches its apogee in Tierrapaulita, a city where most inhabitants are mad (119) and everything is out

of kilter: "The streets are bent . . . the houses are crooked . . . the church . . . one tower this way and the other one the other way" (113). Mere anarchy or, more exactly, the order of disorder is loosed upon the world.

Soon after entering Tierrapaulita, "the shadowy realm of black magic" (94), the Yumis fall prey to the contagion and become twisted themselves: "Celestino saw that his wife now had one eye higher than the other, and Catarina that her husband was going around with his nose twisted and turned up, as if it wanted to visit his left ear" (117). Distortion holds sway as the bottom rises to the top and the underdog, even if no longer the fool, becomes king. We have seen how in part I Celestino, the "laughingstock," was crowned with wealth and power only to be debased and dethroned by his own greed and the Mulata who emblemizes it. He loses his home, his land, his animals, and all his gold to rivers of lava and awakens one morning "in the desolate silence of death, without the bleating of sheep, without the crow of roosters, without the barking of dogs, without the low of cows" (79).

The long-suffering and much harassed Celestino succeeds in restoring his wife to normal height after Tazol had left her a dwarf, however. As the two enter Tierrapaulita, therefore, all is as it was at the beginning. Or almost. The Yumis, like a stubborn, old mule, have learned a few tricks in spite of themselves. They no longer seek gold; they want knowledge instead which in their eyes is the true means to power. In addition, this time around they will not allow Tazol to play tricks on them; for this reason they carry him imprisoned in a cross of dry maize leaves that hangs around Catalina's neck. Poor fools who always get caught, cogs in the devil's wheelworks! As it turns out, Tazol impregnates Catalina through the navel and she, sterile up to this point, gives birth to Tazolín, "as if she had to pass water" (126) and becomes thereafter, the giantess Giroma "which means rich woman, powerful woman, mother of all magic!" (133).

In perfect (although inverted) symmetry to the action at the beginning of the allegory, Catalina-Giroma rises to power through her dealings with the corn-leaf devil. She loses no time in punishing (or further debasing) her husband by turning him into a dwarf on stilts who will dance in public squares under the

name of Chiltic (135). In other words, the ex-king is reduced to being a dwarf while the ex-dwarf becomes a towering giantess. In addition, the two of them and their son Tazolito go on the road as a performing family of acrobats, a traveling carnival show.

Asturias's allegory is so neatly structured that he has even punctuated each phase of crowning and debasement with carnival performances. The first one, Celestino's public exposure in San Martín, prefaces the action before the hero is crowned. More to the point, the exhibitionistic performance fulfills the contractual obligation that warrants his rise to power. The second performance, immediately after the hero's downfall, sees the Yumis paired off with the Mulata's bear and dancing in main squares and fairs (82). The third pairs off Celestino-Chiltic (by now transformed into a dwarf) with Catalina-Giroma and their son Tazolín (135). Finally, Celestino's performance of the carnivalesque dance of the Gigantics (he has been changed from a dwarf to a colossus) is concomitant with Giroma's loss of power after the dwarf Huasanga steals her sex (I, 13).

Even such a brief overview of the carnival scenes and their layout within the novel gives ample token of the regimented order underlying the apparent chaos. Order and symmetry can be said to be distinguishing features of Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* fiction, in fact, and this can be readily adduced from the complex pyramid of numbers, colors, and animals in *Hombres de maíz* and the use of parallelism in *Mulata*, a novel that develops as a series of mirror images. For example, Celestino's evolution, from normal-sized to dwarf and then to giant, echoes his wife's transformation in the opposite direction (i.e., as she grows, he dwindles); each period of crowning and debasement is preceded and followed by carnival scenes; all characters have their doubles and their counterparts; Yumí is also Hayumihaha and Chiltic, Catalina (or Catarina) is likewise Giroma and Lili Puti. The sauvages are men in the body of boars, as Felicito Piedra-santa is a man in the body of a stone (I, 7). Candanga thwarts Cashtoc; Celestino holds out against the Mulata, and the Christian demon baffles Chimalpín. Corn goes into making men; corn leaves into making money. The three protagonists-antagonists of part I (Celestino, Catalina, the Mulata) are

counterbalanced by the three in parts II and III (Cashtoc, Candanga, Chimalpín) and all the main characters' names share the same initial with the exception of the Mulata, who shares hers with the first letter of the Spanish words for maize and excrement, the two substances to which she is likened.

As all characters have their foils, doubles, and counterparts, many events in the novel happen twice, the second time as a distortion of the first. Such is the case of Celestino's marriage to the Mulata, the first time in a civil ceremony for life (I, 3); the second, in a requiem mass where she appears "dressed as a dead bride" for all eternity (II, 5, 242). And yet, in spite of such extraordinary symmetry and painstaking harmony, the reader gets a sense of utter confusion fully intended by the author and brought about through a variety of techniques. In contrast with García Márquez, who suggests continuity through repetition in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Asturias fractures unity in his polymorphic portrayal. Instead of picturing many characters with the same name as does the Colombian writer, the author of *Mulata* portrays the same characters with many names in a total denial of identity, a loss of being that stems from a lack of specificity.

For example, we are told at one point that madwomen (of which there are many in the novel) "like nothing better than to change their names – they think that if they change their names they become different people – and one day, without anyone's knowing why, they want to be Violas, the next day, or after a while, Violets, or even Cirfrusias, Cifernas, Tirrenas, Mabrocordotas, Fabricias, Fabiolas, Quitanias, Murentes, Narentes, Podáliras, Engubias, Tenáquilas, Pasquinas, Shoposas, Zozimas, Zángoras, and – and that's the end of the alphabet," sighs the priest of Tierrapaulita (104).

It is not merely through name changes that Asturias abolishes a sense of character identity, moreover. As early as chap. II, Yumí's loss of self is openly admitted to when he complains after Catalina's disappearance: "Since she got lost through my fault, I haven't been anywhere. Where am I? I don't know, I don't know" (27). And when the Yumís return to their ruined Quiavicús after the first holocaust (I, 8), they even abstain from revealing their thoughts, maintaining that they "don't have words of their own and that's why they repeat the words people

speak to them" (110). This observation induces a curious neighbor to observe that talking like they do makes "everything unreal; one feels that nothing exists" (110).

Loss of identity is the curse of all characters in Asturias's allegory. We have seen how the Mulata "doesn't have enough inky-dinky for a man and she has too much dinky-inky for a woman" (53); so, too, Celestino has a tongue that "speaks two different ways. Sometimes like a peasant, and other times like an educated man" (232), and the sexton Jerónimo finds his body "floating in a liquid absence of everything, turned inside out" at the most crucial moment in his life (286). As we readily recognize that in the traditional novel characters are in perpetual evolution, we must agree that in *Mulata* they are involved in a constant process of transformation. The world of images they inhabit is two-faced; in it join hands love and death, sterility and proliferation, fertile maize and its barren leaf. It is a typically carnivalesque microcosm because "eternally unfinished: a world dying and being born at the same time" (Bakhtin, 166).

Because all nature is in flux in Asturias's allegory, everything becomes its contrary and nothing is what it seems, a feature described in different terms by the omniscient narrator during the earthquake that brings Tierrapaulita to its feet: "There is no inside or outside," complains the disjointed voice, "there are no houses or streets . . . everything is outside and inside . . . everything is house and street" (330). In perpetual transformation, the world described in *Mulata* churns out the men of the future from the ashes of the past. Such proliferation becomes translated in literary terms through hyperbole and grotesque imagery. Everything is prodigal to excess, unmeasured, bigger than life. Celestino cannot begin to measure the extent of his wealth; the Mulata can never satisfy her pleasure or satiate her need for pain; the roaring laughter of the Indian healer Dawn-Grown is "interminable" (310); and the hero's fly, "prodigious" (11). The land that surrounds Quiavicús and Tierrapaulita is a "fecund land, of pomegranate trees with opened fruit from which rubies fell . . . of banana groves guarded by flocks of fireflies of furtive life, pursued by eye-piercing mosquitoes," a land where the different chile plants permeate the night with their strong smell: "garde chile, biting gold, chocolate chile, even more biting, green chile, raisin chile, burned chile, the

dark color of a rooster, *chiltepe*, *zambo chile*, *ulute chile*, scarlet and infernal, an odor that brings on coughing, strangling and snorting, not only in a man but in coarse iguanas" (302).

Is there anything in this description of baroque abundance that can pale in the face of those penned by more widely recognized masters of magical realism? Nothing that pales, to be sure, but a clear difference, the one feature that distinguishes *Mulata* from the type of carnival literature which *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Kingdom of This World* typify. Asturias has blended a rich brew in which, to borrow Bakhtin's terms, the "devouring and defecating body is fused with nature and with cosmic phenomena" (425). But one ingredient – more Bataille than Bakhtinian in nature – shines forth throughout.

For Bataille, eroticism is transgression; it goes against the grain of nature because it denies propagation; its end is the act itself and never its product. Even in Bataille's fiction, however, eroticism is always a choice that does not exclude the sexual option. The difference in *Mulata* and the feature that distinguishes this novel from other works of carnival literature is that eroticism is the one and only alternative offered to characters who are, a priori, deprived of reproducing. It is this very deprivation that brings about the war between the Christian Devil, who wants men to breed, and the Mayan one, who does not.

The demonic forces of the Mayan underworld have "decimated other beings before they were engendered, alive and just as they were in the liquor of life of their progenitors, and that is why there were no children, why there were no young people" (207).³¹ They have decimated men because these lowly creatures have "become self-centered, egotistical, individualists" (173). "Real men," we have seen it, "the ones made out of corn, have stopped existing in reality and have become fictitious creatures, since they did not live for the community, and that is why they should have been suppressed" (173).

If we look at this will to suppress in the light of Asturias's own life, namely, the political events through which he lived, it is obvious that the egoism he is condemning is man's refusal to accept the communal society proposed by the Guatemalan congress of 1953. The men of maize, he thought, have torn up their roots, broken with a past completely reliant on communal

life. In denying the community of man, the people of Guatemala are very simply denying the liquor of life, the ability to propagate. It is on account of such denial, "for his presumption of singularizing himself, considering himself an end in himself!" that "man must be destroyed" (174). But destroyed – and here is the apparent paradox portrayed through carnival imagery – through the forces of creation that perpetually convert havoc into a prolific seedbed.

Realistically described in *Week-end in Guatemala*, the author's own reactions to Castillo Armas's invasion are decanted to produce a symbolic work that is both more subtly political and more violently shocking, one whose rampant destruction is pandemic but neither lasting nor total, a feature indicated in the omniscient narrator's declaration to the effect that Cashtoc, the enemy of life, is *not* "the friend or partisan of death, since he did not propose to end creation but to wipe it out" (134). Readers of the novel will wonder, of course, how one can wipe something out without putting an end to it, an issue that must be examined at this juncture of our discussion.

As we have seen, *Mulata* begins with a fair scene and ends with a holocaust. The first brings in the merry world of carnival with its rich imagery of fertility and inversion. The latter, far from implementing the end of life, generates a death that is pregnant, as can be readily adduced from the colorful imagery of regeneration and rebirth that permeates the last chapter: The snail-like creatures demand the right to be born (III, 3), and the *Mulata*, young and vital once again, explains to the baffled sexton: "I'm the daughter of the one I am . . . I'm my daughter . . . I'm my mother" (299). Most of the characters die in the earthquake that shakes Tierrapaulita, it is true, but this does not mean that life comes to an end.³² The manner in which the cycle of death and regeneration is presented in this last chapter is so essential to the understanding of Asturias's overall conception that it deserves closer scrutiny.

We have already mentioned that in part II, chap. 8, the priest of Tierrapaulita wakes up covered from head to foot with what appear to be smallpox scars. The scene takes place the morning after a fight on the church ceiling when Yumí, transformed into a hedgehog, pierces him with eleven thousand quills. The healer Dawn-Grown recommends a number of rem-

edies to remove the scars, the most drastic of which, riding on a "meat-eating mule," succeeds in cleansing the priest from the vestiges of the disease. This passage of Asturias's novel is clearly inspired by one of the most popular medieval themes, the dispute between non-Lenten and Lenten foods (*La Dispute du gras et du maigre*) in which the antagonist of Lent is "the meat-eater" (quoted in Bakhtin, 298).

Lent is the period of forty weekdays between Ash Wednesday and Easter observed as a time of fasting and penitence by the Roman Catholic and a number of Protestant churches; it is preceded by a season of merrymaking whose name originally derives from the Latin word *carnelevare*, which literally means the removal of meat. The carnivalesque action of *Mulata* reaches its climax at the requiem mass held for the wedding of Yumí and the Mulata, a mass in which "the stripped-down *pro et contra* of life's ultimate questions" – life and death – are juxtaposed (Bakhtin, 116). This mass, sung by a spider in a black chasuble, "was attended by the shadows of lunatics who came out of a burning asylum," and his reverence "didn't say 'Dominus vobiscum!' but 'Breeding tiiime!'" (252). In fact, the entire wedding mass for the dead is punctuated by cries of "Breeding tiiime," which makes the priest wonder how anyone "can have children if God was not alive?" (211).

The day after the mass (i.e., Holy Saturday or Saturday of Glory) is described in chaps. 8 and 9 of part II and chaps. 1 and 2 of part III, starting with "No Dawn in Tierrapaulita." In these chapters, we come against similar examples of dialogic syncretism in which life and death, Christian and indigenous, heaven and hell, are juxtaposed. Finally, the last dawn mentioned in the novel takes place the following day (Easter Sunday) in the chapter entitled "It Is Quaking in the Moon" (III, 3). As the action begins, Chimalpín is riding on the meat-eating mule, an action that suggests the end of Lent, the symbolic return to the meat-eating period, the end of the cycle, and, most significantly, the Paschal rebirth celebrated in the Christian liturgy after forty days of mourning. Such mourning corresponds, of course, to Asturias's own for the putative death of the men of maize, so it is not surprising that he has correlated personal images of destruction and creation with the feast of death and rebirth as celebrated in the Christian calendar.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that he constantly refers to the two mainstream cultures that constitute the cultural backbone of his country, never focusing exclusively on indigenous material. Instead, this material is filtered through and combined with the European culture, which is part and parcel of today's men of maize, both subject and object of his allegory.

In referring to the Christian calendar, the notion Asturias wishes to emphasize is the concept of the feast that, as Bakhtin points out, "is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness" (9). Furthermore, and this is essential in order to understand the blueprint of *Mulata*, "through all the stages of historic development," as Bakhtin argues, "feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man" (9). Clearly, Asturias's saga tells of one such breaking point in the cycle of nature and, in this sense, its conclusion can be readily compared to that of *Hombres de maíz*. The last chapter of the 1963 allegory, as well as the epilogue of the earlier panegyric, describes moments of death and renewal that are characteristic of the festive perception of the world. In both of them Asturias portrays the destruction of a diseased, morally corrupt society while, simultaneously, his use of repetition, of lists, of dual-faced characters, and of metamorphosis suggests a proliferation that will inevitably usher a beginning and launch a new cycle. In typically carnivalesque fashion, his is a conception of the world as eternally unfinished. Pisigüilito, Quiavicús, and Tierrapaulita die but they are born at the same time, possessing as it were two natures just like Chimalpín. The priest of Tierrapaulita wakes up on Easter Sunday and after his ride on the meat-eating mule is transformed into a creature that no one can categorize or identify, but one who is about to start anew.

It is in the dual and conjoined representation of life and death that Asturias reconciles (without ever resolving) his own paradoxical feelings vis-à-vis his countrymen. He loved them, but he had been disappointed – not to say deeply pained – by their behavior. He wished to portray the futility of greed, and, educator to the end, he wanted his message to hit home. He knew human frailty but believed that man could learn from his

mistakes. The social reforms enacted during Arbenz's government signaled a breaking point in the history of Guatemala to the same degree, to be sure, as Castillo Armas's rebuttal of these very reforms. Nonetheless, Asturias was certain that the cycle would continue. He knew that the upper and lower orders would trade places once again, that the logic of carnival would last beyond the vanity of man.

This was his reason for clothing his allegory in the finery of the feast and for choosing to unleash all the forces of the lower body. Carnival, laughter, and upturned conventions were his own way of affirming historic timelessness and man's ability to endure in spite of the errors and mishaps of earlier generations. Humanity would endure through the power of words – the instrument wielded since time immemorial by writers and reformers of all robes.

In praise of folly

Assuredly, no one will take issue against Hartmann's glimpse of the obvious when he states: "There is often something radically strange in the language of others" (*Criticism in the Wilderness*, 143). Words close a gap, but they also confuse and alienate. In *Mulata*, Asturias sets out to deliver a clear-cut message and yet, paradoxically, he undermines his own narrative discourse by dismantling ideological structures, intellectual solidarities, and even the sacred armature of syntax. His story line weaves and wanes, the plot unraveling into a series of vignettes in which language eventually fizzles out into "a total muteness" (305).

In this novel words that usher silence, sudden transitions, and startling transformations are but a few of the weapons blandished in the pursuit of discontinuity. If the language of traditional fiction seeks to portray a "reality" that is true to itself, the author of *Mulata*, on the contrary, goes to great lengths to withdraw and deny each reality, each context, each tale composing the fiction. Such dramatic withdrawal parallels the essential psychotic symptom, a startling feature indeed in the work of an author such as Asturias. Startling because "psychotic" discourse would jibe, it seems, with the aims of a man whose lifelong aspiration was to do things with words, to structure and transform reality through language.

Why, one wonders, is *Mulata* irrational and self-consuming if its didactic message was meant to be aired? Why does its author portray a world in which the abnegation of the ego leads to the demise of communication if language itself – the authorial tool par excellence – is apostatized? To answer these questions we must turn back to the prototypes, ancient as well as modern, that work into Asturias's ideological stance; it is only in the light of these that the full intent of his allegory becomes clear.

Few critics have examined Asturias's debt to ancient myths in greater detail than Richard Callan and Gerald Martin. Callan's insightful though psychologically confused *Miguel Angel Asturias* has provided a wealth of information to readers of the Nobel Prize winner for many years. The trouble with his method and approach is his espousal of free-hand interpretation Eliade-style, a feature that leads to some rather startling revelations (as, for example, when he suggests that in *Hombres de maíz* Nicho Aquino impersonates Attis, a fact, he argues, substantiated by his full name, "Di-oni-si-o Aqui-no Co-jay," which he claims can be understood as "Aquí no coj (ones) hay" [62]). The hastiness of some of Callan's attributions and interpretations should not detract from his major contribution concerning the mythic substratum of Asturias's fiction, however. I specifically refer to the Dionysian element which this critic stations at the heart of *El señor presidente* and *Hombres de maíz*.

Callan is plainly wrong to rely on Attic myths in order to explain works of literature written by a dedicated student of Maya-Quiché culture. On the other hand, the Dionysian element he alludes to does have direct bearing on Asturias's *neo-Indigenismo* and particularly on *Mulata de tal*. Dionysian frenzy is generally seen as a psychological, social, and political force, as an irrational element that is a ritual expression of psychological responses to social and environmental determinants. In her engaging study on *Madness and Literature*, Lillian Feder convincingly argues that Dionysian myths express "early stages in the development and functioning of the conscious mind, adapting controls over older biological and psychological processes" (39). In her opinion, the story of this frenzy in its many renditions (from Euripides' *Bacchae* to the Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69*) "conveys the effort of human beings to regulate their feelings and their conduct" (39).

Dionysian myths are dramatizations, first, of man's libidinal and aggressive drives and, second, of the control exerted to harness the destructive instinct, to fuse the two complementary impulses. Feder explains how in these myths ego functions – evident during or immediately after mad and violent acts – develop as a result of these integrating and controlling operations. Understandably, she attributes the presence of paradox in Dionysian tales to the conflictive aspect of man's innate impulses. This is why self-knowledge always emerges through violence and destruction, through reason and madness. "In this symbolic fusion of instinctual drives," concludes Feder, "the projected god who afflicted human beings with madness and violence becomes the god of fertility, the principle of creation in nature" (43).

We can see right away the numerous parallels between Feder's contentions and Asturias's scheme, even when the latter breaks down the antagonistic drives that Dionysus embodies into two figures: Cashtoc (emblem of destruction and death) and Candanga (symbol of sexuality and procreation). Like Dionysus, nonetheless, these two forces are responsible for mad and violent acts and account for the paradox that is the essence of the carnivalesque structure: They bring about destruction and death while promoting fertility and growth. Also like Dionysus, the demons of Asturias's novel have the power to inflict madness on others (the Dramatic of Tierrapaulita informs the Yumis: "I'm mad, mad, mad, one of Cashtoc's madwomen" [99]), and their rites involve *sparagmos* (tearing and scattering of limbs) and *omophagia*, or cannibalism, two typical features of Dionysian frenzy.

These same features are obsessions of that other Dionysian figure in the novel, the lubricious Mulata who covets Yumi's body in order to tear it to pieces and remove his gold skeleton. In addition, she is portrayed as a "woman-man," as is Dionysus himself (Feder, 45), and referred to as "a happy madwoman" (62). It is not unreasonable to think, therefore, that the rampant havoc, the carnivalesque maelstrom in *Mulata* springs from the same forces that give shape to the concept of Dionysian frenzy in other works of literature. In allegorizing the dual and complementary forces that grapple for supremacy within man's psyche, Asturias strives to establish an equivalence (as

Gerald Martin so discerningly observes) between Aztec and Mayan myths and those from other parts of the world. This is not the same as to affirm (as does Richard Callan), "that the characters of *Hombres de maíz* 'represent' specific mythological characters in situations which correspond exactly to those in Greek myths" (Martin, ccxxxvii).

Asturias's knack to filter, store, and recast myth and folklore was made surprisingly little of during his lifetime and even less after his death. Partly, no doubt, the reason was because whenever interviewed he deluded everyone into thinking he was perfectly guileless, almost childlike in his responses. He was fond of talking about the clay figurines he had played with in Salamá and about his fear of the devil, but seldom, if ever, did he discuss his handling and transposition of cultural material. When one reads his interviews, it is clear that the answers elicited respond to questions asked and that perhaps too little was asked because too little was known about this mysterious, confusing and complex man who gave the impression that he was open-hearted, plain and amiable, but, most decidedly, no great intellect. And, because he was no great intellect, supposedly, critics have tended to take his works of fiction (at least the most complex ones) purely at face value.³³

By this I mean that *Mulata* is traditionally viewed as a grotesque extravaganza, as artifice, as *esperpento* for the sake of *esperpento* (to use one of the many labels that abound in our criticism to suggest much and mean little). Critical shortsightedness combined with the demonstrated complexity of the *neo-Indigenista* fiction has done much to obscure the layers of meaning sustaining the *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata de tal*. The more recent novel, most particularly, is so dense and its symbolism so layered that many readers remain at its threshold, seldom realizing that in his allegorical scrimmage between the libidinal and the aggressive, Asturias challenges the reader to recognize man's potential violence and, simultaneously, his capacity for insight and control.

The violence is bred by the egotistical values fostered in turn by consumer society. Modern man is selfishly individualistic, the very antithesis of his Mayan ancestors who were in harmony with nature and the community. The *Mulata's* duality corresponds to the fusion of "Apollonian" and "Dionysian," to

borrow Nietzsche's terms. The latter, emblem of "sensuality and cruelty," is held in check by the former, symbol of the "glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*" which must collapse if humans are to reach a state of equilibrium with nature (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 36). The difference between Nietzsche's and Asturias's conceptions is that the former (in *Ecce Homo*, for instance) revels in the condition of narcissistic solitude to which his identification with Dionysus/Zarathustra has brought him, whereas Asturias despises such solitude.

To the Guatemalan idealist, salvation and man's *raison d'être* lie within the community. Since man has turned his back on it and shrugged off all reason, Asturias must assume, as does Nietzsche, that madness both expresses and channels instinctual impulses and can foster psychological health and communal unity. Madness is so deep-rooted, so inwoven into the fabric of *Mulata*, that the very language of the novel echoes the features of schizophrenic speech. Time and again, responses to the external world, in the form of both description and dialogue, are not kept separate from the fantasy processes that are going on at the same time in the mind of characters. This is why the language of certain sections (such as the following passage from "The Strange Science of Curing") presents a picture of frequent interruptions that resembles nonsense:

A play on words I wrote and smote the hurl of evil that you quote, open or closed, a surfeit of the magic mote, oh, man who keeps a goat in Tierrapaulita, where the sheep are goats, drive out the ghosts! (265)

Two other characteristics of schizophrenic speech borrowed by Asturias are the use of neologisms ("updoubleset" [212]) and chance associations of sound and meaning that conspire to produce rhyming or alliterative effects (as, for example, "He said up . . . the set-up . . . I'm fed up!" [273]). In addition, grammatical structures are likely to disappear from his discourse, giving the effect of a telegraphic style of utterance often lacking in sustained sense: "Cure-cure-cure, curer of the curate!" (265) or, better yet, "she tucked her old woman's face into the darkness of the moon covered by an enormous . . . she could not see what . . . to close her eyes . . . and she moaned . . . the weight" (304). The schizophrenic also disassociates part of his ego from

himself, and examples of such duality abound in *Mulata* as, for example, when, after losing his wife, Yumí exclaims: "I was around, but I really wasn't. Since she got lost through my fault, I haven't been anywhere. Where am I? I don't know, I don't know" (27), or when the Cleaning Woman mutters (in III, 2): "me myself . . . me somebody else . . . me everybody . . . me forever!" (286).

Finally, it should be noted that schizophrenic speech is most typically characterized by regressive forms of expression in which the image undergoes disintegration, schematization, and degradation. Regression is featured in Asturias's fiction by means of the scatological fixation already discussed and, specifically, in the systematic association between words and excrement. "The word was not made flesh but diarrhea," argues one character (102), and later in the action, when Tazolín goes up to his father, "who was farting and brushing his teeth," the reader is categorically told that "words are the dirtiest things there are" (143).

Words are dirty, but given the inverted logic of carnival, the language of creation must evolve through filth and decay. To say something, even when words are tainted, is to have it materialize. Which is why the priest of Tierrapaulita cuts short the sexton who insists that the coconuts in the cloister are women taking a leak with a shout that makes him stop dead in his tracks: "Why did you say that," he lashes out angrily, "why didn't you let that devilish vision be undone? Now, now it already has the flesh of words" (146).

"All power is in words, in the sound of words," argues another character who likewise maintains, "we all have the witching sound in our throats" (100–101). But if it is true that man (and, most assuredly, the writer) creates through a "witching sound," why should the sound have the timbre of madness in Asturias's conception? Or, to adapt Nietzsche's questions to a different context, "What is the significance of that madness out of which tragic and comic art developed – the Dionysian madness? Is madness perhaps not necessarily the symptom of degeneration, decline, and the final stage of culture?" (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 21). This last thought is a tempting one, although Nietzsche, along with a full cast of philosophers, social scientists, thinkers, and tinkerers of all robes, has done his best to

convince us of madness's perpetual power, of its unceasing role in the struggle for liberation from false attitudes and values.

For Asturias, too, madness channels instinctual impulses that constitute a possibility for a rebirth of the "true" self (Feder, 281). His lifelong quest for authenticity can be traced back to the authors – Vasconcelos, Breton, Mauss, Jung – who influenced him throughout his creative years. It is from them that he borrows and recasts the notions of liberating frenzy, creation through decay, and selfishness as disease. It is fascinating to see how these notions play straight into Asturias's own psychological development, allowing him to channel anger and disappointment into a delirious fable that breaks with all canonical definitions of taste, reason, and order and makes a plea for understanding an alternate mode of communication. More than any of his earlier works, *Mulata* constitutes such a plea. With it, the Guatemalan author comes closer than ever before to Breton's first definition of surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought" (*Manifestos of Surrealism*, 26).

The still waters of the unconscious run deep; to reach them, Asturias plunges into the exploration of dreams, hallucinations, and automatic writing in order to allow images to appear "like the only guideposts of the mind" (*Manifestos of Surrealism*, 37). The narrativity of *Mulata*'s earlier chapters gives way to figurations meant to startle the reader, to open the doors of perception. This may all sound somewhat vague, but it certainly wasn't to the author of Guatemala's most confounding allegory. The decaying world he portrays is shaken up in order to extract reason from unreason. How? By rending repression with the sharp edge of madness. It is only thus that the poet can hope to unite himself with his fellow men in a revolutionary consciousness. *Another sort* of revolutionary consciousness. Because Asturias had cast his lot with the social revolution until history had proved him wrong.

What was left if men could not be reached through reasonable means? How could the author of *Mulata* tap the wellspring from which the human ethos draws nourishment? But first things first. Building could not take place on the roof of the charnel house. Before attempting to reach any sort of collective

unconscious, it was necessary to eradicate all signs of transitory and physical man, the walking corpses that Artaud and Vasconcelos first identified as "carrion man." "Man must be destroyed, and his construction wiped out, for his presumption of singularizing himself, considering himself an end in himself!" demands Candanga (174). Refusing to live for the community, rejecting his condition as "kernels of corn, parts of an ear" (173), and becoming self-centered instead, man no longer has "any reason for being" (175). He is a hollow shell. Further echoing the feelings of Artaud, for whom "consciousness" is "nothingness," Asturias's characters are "unfortunate in the nothingness and the emptiness of their ego" (175).³⁴ Even afterlife brings no respite. The "phantoms of the non-self" haunt all realms and induce the aptly named "Santano" (i.e., "Saint Anus") to reflect upon the "absolute certainty that there is nothing, really nothing" (*Mulata*, 229-230).

Man has become a shadow without substance; the values, myths, and traditions that had meaning heretofore are trampled over in this fool's paradise (which is why the ants, whose role in *Hombres de maíz* is to carry the sacred corn kernels on their backs, are reduced to dealing with "the dry husks that will be converted into money" in *Mulata* [44]). All is a sham; as Candanga observes, "Only the first parents were authentic, all other men and women are photographs that are taken from orgasm to orgasm, based on previous photographs and paradisiacal images" (230). Living matter is "the absolute negation" because it lacks authenticity; it must be destroyed, discarded, dismissed. The burning question for Asturias is, How can I banish the human race and, at the same time, have such extinction serve a purpose, carry a message that will not be negative as man himself has proven to be?

In order to obliterate "rational" consciousness, "rational" discourse, "rational" laws of consumption and distribution, he forges an aesthetic that fuses Nietzsche's ideas with Vasconcelos's. Madness, the symptom of "degeneration and decline," "the final stage of culture," pokes at the ribs of social dictatorship while simultaneously ushering the rebirth of a more authentic self. The bastion of unreasonable reason (represented in the trading of human flesh, love, companionship, and community for money) must topple over. For this reason, destruc-

tion is rampant in *Mulata*, although it must be seen for what it is – no more, no less. The old, the decayed, the useless is discarded; the ability to generate is not which is why the last section of the allegory teems with unbegotten life in the form of creatures that demand: “we want to be born” (297), and the narrator interjects, “what a sweet demand, wanting to be born . . . how just . . . how divine . . . coming into life” (298).

Disgusted by the manifestation of individual life Asturias searches for a way to fill the emptiness, the “nothingness” that makes the very idea of autonomous existence unbearable. But what can possibly remain after carrion man has been wiped from the face of the earth? The idealistic advocate of collectivism reaches toward the “transcendental experiences” that constitute “the well-spring of all religions” and offer up a sharp contrast to a man’s egoic approach to reality – the same type of approach that R. D. Laing views as “a form of socially accepted madness” in his book, *The Politics of Experience* (a book that appears in print the same year as *Mulata* and one that is heavily influenced by Jung’s notion of the collective unconscious).

In contrast to egoic experience, the state of ego-loss (strived for throughout *Mulata* and made manifest through denial of identity and polymorphic evolution) can be “veritable manna from heaven” in the words of Laing (137–138). To the social scientist, as to the author of fiction, “True sanity entails . . . the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self completely adjusted to our alienated social reality.” After its demise, “the ‘inner’ archetypal mediators of divine power” will emerge and through this death, “a rebirth and the eventual re-establishment of a new kind of ego functioning . . .” will come about (Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, 137–138).

Pseudo mystical mystification? Hardly. Remove the “divine power” that occupies and preoccupies Laing and substitute the “unconscious” in its stead and we have Asturias’s judicious, even if purely idealistic, scheme. In seeking a new kind of ego-functioning what the author of *Mulata* strives for is really the curtailment (perhaps an even better word would be the breakdown) of the conscious level upon which man’s false attitudes and values have been grafted (the very attitudes, in other words, that compel the characters of *Mulata* to exist in isolation, “alien to the millions of destinies that are being woven and

unwoven around [them]!" (173–174). Reaching into the unconscious, Asturias aims to affirm the brotherhood of men by harking back to the culture and, more specifically, to the ethical principles of his Mayan ancestors.

Disappointed by "carrion" creatures but, at the same time, never one to be defeated by their blunders, he strives to break down the resistance of modern men, to demonstrate the unreasonable aspect of all that passes for reasonable. But whose resistance are we referring to when the men and women in the novel have been exterminated?

We can neither question nor doubt Asturias's profoundest commitment: to make an accomplice of the reader. This was his greatest postulate of reason, what distinguishes him from authors whose fictions are designed to amuse, to inform, and to entertain without necessarily engaging the reader's beliefs. Not that he didn't wish to entertain; it is simply that his allegories were designed, first and foremost, to persuade humanity of the many virtues inherent in communal life. But, unlike *Hombres de maíz*, in which the construction and growth of a Utopian society are portrayed outright in the epilogue, the scheme of *Mulata* is based on destruction. The irrationality of its language and the inconsistency of its characters are also meant to translate the raging madness that, according to Asturias, lies at the core of commercial society. Instead of deploying rational discourse (which is totally irrational as he amply demonstrates), he pursues irrationality.

As Plato suggests in *Phaedrus* (244 D-E), one of the benefits of madness is its conversion of guilt into prayer and expiation. Madness leads families who have endured "disease and the greatest suffering . . . to purification and sacred rites" and brings, therefore, "a means of release." Madness is both a manifestation of guilt and an avenue of deliverance from its ravages – guilt which issues from selfishness in Asturias's scheme and is eventually vanquished by Dionysian frenzy, the civilizing function that creates while it destroys. The insane, squalid world depicted in *Mulata* is designed to rattle the self, contentedly adjusted to what, in the eyes of the author, is an alienated social reality. If egoic society is shown to topple from its own inner decay, isn't it high time that man begins to crusade for a different type of social contract, one guaranteeing the greatest

happiness for the greatest number? It is at this point that a new kind of ego functioning must take the scepter.

Undaunted by history, the author of Guatemala's greatest satire forges ahead, deeply committed to transform public opinion and bring about social renewal. His formulated intentions in *Mulata* are no different from his aims in the *Leyendas de Guatemala*, in *El señor presidente*, in *Hombres de maíz*. What has changed is the approach, the need to reach beyond the purely "human" concerns and petty preoccupations that, to borrow Artaud's words, "stink unbelievably of man, transitory and physical man" (*The Theater and its Double*, 235).³⁵ Here is Asturias, then, at the age of 64, looking for a path to spiritual transcendence that could point the way to reform a sick world. At the height of his creative powers, he amalgamates the voices of all his masters into a new battle cry, never tiring, always hopeful, some might even say relentless, in his striving to heal mankind.

The *neo-Indigenista* novel he writes in the early 1960s had to be irrational because it is addressed to an irrational world, its syntax falls to pieces and its discourse culminates in a halting stutter because the language of reason is no more and no less than the language of power, man's greatest folly. *Mulata* seems to end, as the song that concludes it, with "nothing at all" (307). But let not the reader be misled by words in a work where every utterance oozes with mendacity. *Mulata* doesn't conclude with its ending and this is no rhetorical formulation. It doesn't conclude because its purpose and goal throughout are to startle, to awaken, to plant a seed. Asturias's greatest strength was that he never lost hope. His characters may be condemned, as may be the readers who mirror their selfish behavior. But even this is of no great consequence. To the idealistic author of Guatemala's mordant satire – as for Tazol, the corn devil – hope lies with future generations, "who are cut off by death when they get old, and are sown into the ground to come to life again!" (143).

Conclusion: From death unto life

Estás hoy tú y mañana
otro igual a ti seguirá en la espera.
No hay prisa ni exigencia.
Los hombres no se acaban.
Aquí había un valle, ahora se alza un monte.
Allá había un cerro, ahora hay un barranco.
El mar petrificado se convirtió en montaña
y se cristalizaron relámpagos en lagos.
Sobrevivir a todos los cambios es tu sino.
No hay prisa ni exigencia. Los hombres no
se acaban.

Miguel Angel Asturias,
"Sabiduría indígena"

Psychoanalytical theory and the bitter facts of contemporary history suggest that mankind is reaching the end of the road. Psychoanalytical theory declares that the end of this road is the dominion of death-in-life. History has brought mankind to that pinnacle on which the total obliteration of mankind is at last a practical possibility. At this moment of history the friends of the life instinct must warn that the victory of death is by no means impossible.

Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*

We have repeatedly stated that Asturias was a firm believer in the "magical" power of language (Harss, 102–106).¹ In his hands, words were instruments that could inspire, convince, and educate; with cunning and skill, they might even be wielded to uproot the misconceptions and prejudices of a semifeudal country such as Guatemala and to indicate the path to emancipation and a better future. The author of *El problema social del indio*

(1923) envisioned change as a gradual process that could transform his homeland and saw himself as the high priest of a new cult, a *Gran Lengua* whose task would be to heal the chaos that followed the conquest and threw the Indian into a state of alienation, backwardness and grief.

His reforming ideals were expressed in writing as early as his doctoral dissertation and throughout his life in countless essays that include *La arquitectura de la vida nueva* (1928), "Ideales que han faltado a Guatemala," "El uso de razón," "Ojo nuevo," "Guatemala es un desierto," *Rumania, en su nueva imagen* (1964), and *Latinoamérica y otros ensayos* (1968).² But Asturias was not just another idealist piqued by the social and political upheavals perpetually assailing the little banana republic where he was born. He was a talented writer and a creative genius of the first magnitude. At times his tendency to proselytize could gain the upper hand, it is true, but in a significant number of instances his inspiration and the originality of his background combined to produce some of the most innovative works of literature written in the twentieth century – works of such significance that they should suffice to place him at the fountainhead of the literary Boom that took Latin America by storm in the 1960s. The importance of his innovation is seldom recognized, however, because his contribution to the art of fiction has only just begun to be approached with an eye to structure and composition rather than to the historical, political, and biographical undercurrents that inform it.

It is short of astounding to discover that the often criticized "lack of unity" in this author's *neo-Indigenista* fiction is actually an innovative synthesis combining structural and rhetorical devices characteristic of pre-Columbian literature with allegory and sublimation. By this I mean that above and beyond the relation of events in *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal*, Asturias tells a personal story about the state of his own psyche and uses his protagonists as symbolical vehicles to carry his message. It is partly for this reason that characters in these works do not develop chronologically or ethically. The *neo-Indigenista* novels are so much a part of Asturias's own ethos that they unfold organically as a mirror of his unconscious, a dramatization of personal anxieties, aspirations, and phantasms. For example, assembled soon after the author's stormy

marriage to Clemencia Amado comes to an end and in the midst of his developing intimacy with Blanca Mora y Araujo, *Hombres de maíz* is the portrayal of an evolution from scission to unity (María Tecún goes back to Goyo Yic, man returns to the land, and the Indian recognizes the forgotten values of ancestral culture). In its depiction of rejection (figured through mutilation and a personification of the duality – man/woman, Indian/*ladino*, nature/culture) the novel also portrays Asturias's own emotional trauma vis-à-vis his first wife, exile, and women in general.

The same deflection of instinctual impulses from their primitive form to one that is considered more socially and culturally acceptable is present in *Mulata de tal*, a work that translates the author's indignation vis-à-vis his countrymen for selling out to capitalist interests and allowing selfishness to triumph over the ideal of a Utopian community. The 1964 satire dramatizes desire, denial, and repudiation by means of allegorical tableaux in which a scatological obsession is conspicuously present. Conceived as a tale of human greed, it is a tragedy of feelings in the guise of a grotesque and demon-riddled comedy.

Suggesting that Asturias's characters translate instinctual impulses and that his plots develop allegorically is tantamount to saying that he always proceeds by indirection in his *neo-Indigenista* fiction; on one level, he relates a story that is clearly understandable but also, woven within it, he layers his message by means of references to Mayan mythology and builds up his plots with a technique that is more akin to that of architecture than to that of literature. Borrowing one of Roland Barthes's favorite terms, we could say that Asturias's fiction is always *bricolage*, a gathering of flotsam and jetsam that calls to account his three formative interests: surrealist theory, Mayan mythology, and the problem of cultural identity (with all its political and sociological ramifications).

The rich complexity of Asturias's layering system is particularly evident when we contrast his mature *neo-Indigenista* fiction with one of his early stories, say, "La venganza del indio," first published in *El Imparcial* on May 21, 1926 (*Periodismo*, 115). This tale is traditional in its conception and realistic in its portrayal of "rudimentary technique" and, thematically speaking, "halfway between *costumbrismo* and *indigenismo*" (Martin, *O.C.*,

IV, lxii). More to the point of our discussion: its message is undisguised and univocal.

Merely four years after writing "La venganza," all this plain speaking is cast by the wayside. By the time the *Leyendas de Guatemala* appear in print, the three ingredients that inform Asturias's mature style have transformed his writing beyond all recognition. The relation of events is still distinguishable through the decorative web that encases the legends, but each one develops as an illustration of a typically surrealist device and several incorporate elements borrowed from Mayan mythology.

Because Asturias's collection of legends are contemporary versions of ancient fables, the didactic function inherent in the original model carries over to them as well. Furthermore, each teaches a moral lesson that is both self-contained within the boundaries of a single story and takes on depth as a note in the overall narrative "melody" that reveals its full meaning when read as an ensemble. The message of the *Leyendas* becomes the *Gran Lengua*'s battle cry and stays with him throughout his life: The autochthonous cultural tradition of Guatemala, he argues, lies buried but not forgotten, cast aside but still within reach, and must be incorporated into the mainstream of daily life at all costs. The country cannot go on being one body torn to pieces and should learn to recognize its own limbs, its own heart, its own flesh and blood.

In contrast to José María Arguedas, who sees the salvation of the Indian in the hands of the mestizo or *indio ladinizado*, the author of *Hombres de maíz* believes the making of postcolonial civilization in Latin America is not contingent on the Indian learning the ways of the ruling class but on the ruling class learning the ways of the Indian. After all, white culture has no respect or understanding of nature's balance; it mistreats even the land from which it obtains sustenance. Rather than invest in the future and wait for several generations, the *ladino* burns whole forests of precious woods to plant corn for an immediate and wholly reckless profit. Such recklessness and lack of concern for the needs of others are not surprising because Western civilization is completely self-oriented; it substitutes sharing and cooperation for egotism and greed. Asturias feels it is high time this morally backward culture begins to learn from one

that is in every way superior to it ("only the Greeks are comparable to the Maya," he writes, brimming with admiration, in "Hacia una patria mejor," an article that appears in *El Imparcial* on April 18, 1927).³

The evolution in thinking from the time of his own early writing is momentous. In 1923, when he writes *El problema social del indio*, the young lawyer was just like the bourgeois reading public that he will aim to convert years later. Addressing a problem that Angel Rama would describe from an entirely different perspective, Asturias explains how miscegenation (or *mestización*, to use his own term) has among its goals "the racial, cultural and linguistic homogeneity of a country that has social segments of backward civilization or culture and others of a superior civilization or culture" (*El problema social*, 100). It is clear from the section in his dissertation entitled "Crossbreeding" that the culture he disparages is the Indian and that he forcefully argues in favor of *ladinización* because he feels that the members of this race are "the prototype(s) of the anti-hygienic person," creatures comparable to cattle.⁴ He has no doubts that *mestización* "would give the Indian a wide margin to develop from the primitive social conditions in which he finds himself to the social level left in place by European civilization" (101).

In 1923, therefore, he regards Indians as "fanatical . . . and cruel," as a race "more inclined to stealing than to homicide," and one that shows "evident signs of degeneration" (84).⁵ Left to its own devices, this sickly breed will decline and perish, while in contrast, "the children of German men and Indian women are robust and well-endowed" (86). Asturias's embrace of positivist dogma is so thorough at this stage in his life that he passes judgment on a culture with a blindness that belies his intimate contact with it while he was growing up. When he argues that "the Indian population lacks a spirit of cohesion" (84), and that selfishness is "a highly developed character trait" among members of this race (98), one cannot help doubting his own declarations to Luis López Alvarez to the effect that he spent many an hour in the company of Indian families while his grandfather inspected his plantations around Horca de la Paz (*Conversaciones*, 47). But then again, he was a child when all this supposedly took place; his education in the years that followed under mentors that were heavily influenced by the teachings of

Auguste Comte would have taken care of masking over his first, direct contacts with the native population of Guatemala.

The truth is, we should admire Asturias for a feature of his character that is often criticized: his ability to evolve, his knack for renewing himself. The Protean author who describes the Maya with disdainful condescension in *El problema social del indio* is the very same one who laments their downfall in "Meditaciones del pie descalzo" and portrays their culture as a model in *Hombres de maíz*. Let it not be said he was inconstant, however; leaving for Europe in 1924 and coming in contact with a whole new set of values made him reconsider his posture vis-à-vis the motherland, the men and women who inhabit it, and, above all, himself.

Most of his biographers have tried to whitewash the blatant racism portrayed in *El problema social del indio* and, like Carlos Meneses, have tried to make us believe that this critically naive, shallow, and error-filled document is a humanistic treatise in which its author "suggested solutions" to palliate the moral and physical blemishes ailing the autochthonous inhabitants of Mesoamerica (Meneses, 26).⁶ While it is true that Asturias proposes a number of solutions to "improve" the Indians' living conditions, it is undeniable that these "remedies" reflect the prejudices of the country's dominant class. In 1923, the young author's answers to the Indian problem are immigration and cultural mestization; in other words, he suggests that native strains should be "improved" with a salutary injection of foreignness.

Merely four years later, this attitude has evolved full circle. Asturias's queries in an article written for *El Imparcial* on April 18, 1927, summarize the problems that are beginning to haunt him. "Our disdain and our ignorance of our own culture borders on the criminal," he writes. "Can Guatemala ever become a prosperous nation when its own children ignore her spiritually? ("Hacia una patria mejor," *Periodismo*, 175). This radical change in frame of mind is brought about by the courses on Mayan culture and civilization at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the College de France but it is also a response to the widespread interest in the Paris of the 1920s for so-called primitive cultures. This is the time when the "civilized world" begins readily to admit the originality of the preindustrial

mind, the time when the collections of the Musée de l'Homme are streamlined and presented to the public in a coherent, didactic fashion, the time when Marcel Mauss's lectures pack auditoriums and Picasso's African art-inspired paintings hang on the walls of the most avant-garde salons in the French capital. Is it a wonder that the young Guatemalan student who, as Marc Cheymol rightly points out, is trying so hard to assimilate the achievements of European culture should reassess his own perception of a civilization he thought he knew (Cheymol, *Periodismo*, 851)? Asturias may rediscover America through the eyes of Europe, but soon enough, he rethinks his own rediscovery in terms of the person he has become.⁷

This is why we can affirm that his years in Paris were in every way an epiphany. This is the time when he comes to terms with the originality of Maya-Quiché culture and, after trying to identify with Europe and assimilate its art, its literature, and its system of references ends up recognizing, and celebrating, his own difference. In other words, after the initial period of alienation and awe, the experience of being a stranger in a strange land becomes a wellspring to be tapped. Like Gertrude Stein and Joyce, he comes to view his homeland with the unforgiving clarity of vision that stepping momentarily aside from one's own culture can provide. Once he finds a sense of mission in the French capital, he throws himself lock, stock, and barrel into his new role. His difference – cultural, physical, and mental – will become the hallmark of his uniqueness; stirring the until then muddy waters of culture and identity allows him to revel for the first time in his own Indian heritage.

This brand-new admiration for the Maya will inform his developing American idiom, but portraying it – the admiration, I mean – is a whole different matter. It was one thing to travel through the path of self-confrontation and self-recognition after studying under the foremost experts on Mesoamerican civilization and working directly with Indian manuscripts. It was another to convince his countrymen, who had not enjoyed the same learning experience, that the culture they had been disparaging since the sixteenth century was the very one they should now begin to admire. The last thing Asturias wanted was to sound like Suárez, the effete intellectual in *Raza de bronce*

whose naively poetic vision of Indian culture hampers rather than furthers the natives' cause. He begins to ponder over the best method to translate what he was learning in Paris into a persuasive argument, one that was not simply decorative like the *Indianistas*' but one that would do more than just agonize over the tragic conditions of Indian life in our day and age.

Rather than indoctrinate his readers, he decides to demonstrate the originality and moral superiority of Maya-Quiché civilization by borrowing both the narrative techniques and the value systems that are fundamental to its literature and way of life. He proceeds, not unlike the monks in the Romanesque abbeys or the deacons of the Gothic cathedrals, by pointing to a picture in which the scenes to be learned are portrayed. As he had evolved from the positivist-influenced *El problema social del indio* to a depiction of native culture that is halfway between *costumbrismo* and *indigenismo* in "La venganza del indio," at this stage – following his self-confrontation and newly gained understanding of his own identity – he begins to produce a new language that seeks to incorporate the Indians' world vision. The results are "Luis Garrafita," "En la tiniebla del cañaveral," and the *Leyendas de Guatemala*.⁸

His twentieth-century pilgrims begin by discovering that Indian culture is still within reach (in the *Leyendas*) and are shown how communal living on the basis of the ancient model laid out by the Maya should cement the path to the future and heal a country that has been socially, morally, and economically ailing since Alvarado's troops brought it to its knees (this is the lesson of *Hombres de maíz*). When readers fail to heed his message, Asturias chastizes them (in *Mulata de tal*) by showing that greed only leads to barrenness and the only true wealth lies in communication and human contact.⁹

It is not surprising that Asturias should carve out a new mission for himself after beginning his formal study of Mayan culture. Since meeting Vasconcelos as a young man, he had set great store on the notions of responsibility and commitment expounded by the hero of *Prometeo Vencedor*. He had shown great dedication to the poor and the workers of his native country by becoming a charter member and teacher of the Universidad Popular; he had played an active role in the Unionista party

and in *El Estudiante*, the most radical student newspaper edited in Guatemala in the early 1920s, and he had been just as dedicated in the struggle for the formation of a federation of Central American states while still a student at the university. Clearly, he was always a *causista*, always someone with a mission. This is no doubt why he responds so avidly to Prometheus's words at the end of Vasconcelos's play. "If something remains to be done [here on Earth]," the Titan tells Satan, "it would really be man's duty to continue his struggle" (63). The Guatemalan author takes this message to heart in spite of the difficulties, for, as Prometheus goes on to explain, telling the truth is never easy, "men never forgive you for it, because they see their vices denounced and the gods punish you because their thrones have injustice as their base!" (49).

Curiously but not at all surprisingly, once Asturias gets to Paris he discovers that the seeds planted by the Mexican author coincide in many ways with what the surrealists are clamoring about. When in 1925 Aragón declares, "The age of metamorphosis has begun" the author of *El problema social del indio* sits up and takes notice. In this pronouncement Aragón is specifically referring to the ability of the human mind to change all things, a belief that, in the words of Mary Ann Caws, "is essential to surrealist hope and is in large part responsible for its spirit" (46). As Vasconcelos's heroes argue, man's highest aim is to be found in the perpetual struggle for improvement. "Hurry onward and fill yourself with sublime inconformity," Prometheus tells Satan, "And as you get to be a man, remember that man is a bridge! The silver bridge that ties together the worldly kingdom with the kingdom of infinity!" (Vasconcelos, 92). There is no doubt that in his *neo-Indigenista* fiction Asturias was urging humanity to cross the silver bridge alluded to by the Mexican statesman. Not the one that would take us to the kingdom of heaven, of course, but – good humanist that he was – the one that leads to a better life right here on this earth. This is why the author of *Hombres de maíz* could have declared along with Prometheus: "My mission is to accelerate the progress of humanity" (*Prometeo vencedor*, 39).

Because he is thoroughly convinced of the artist's role as missionary, Asturias spends his life looking for a path that will lead human beings beyond the quagmire of selfishness represented

by Saturnino in *Prometeo vencedor* and by the generation of spineless tergiversators he himself portrays in *Mulata de tal* and *Dos veces bastardo* (1974).¹⁰ What is particularly noteworthy is that he does not become a naive idealist like so many *Indigenistas* before him. The human laboratory that is his own country teaches him that struggle is the essence of life. In a manner that is not without echoing Camus's philosophy, Asturias highlights the freedom and responsibility of the individual and suggests that striving for improvement is what gives meaning to existence. It is this philosophy that allows him to continue writing when his plans for an agricultural community go awry in 1954; more to the point, it is this line of thinking that turns him into a lucid optimist, someone aware of the odds and, yet, willing to fight in spite of the losses. This explains the rare combination of acrimonious criticism, mordant irony, and popular humor in a novel like *Mulata de tal*. Even when history demonstrates that the agricultural community drafted in *Hombres de maíz* is a chimera, its creator goes on clamoring in the desert, reminding himself and us that, "what burns up is saved, and sooner or later attains the realm of clear light!" (*Prometeo vencedor*, 92).

In 1930, and still today, this message goes flush against national feeling. How could Guatemala struggle to improve itself if improvement means integrating the ostracized Indian element? Asturias was determined to convince the schizoid ex-viceroyalty where he was born of the need to visualize opposites as facets of the same entity. This is why Indian and *ladino*, Catholic and pagan, ancient and modern shape the *Leyendas de Guatemala*, *Hombres de maíz*, and *Mulata*. Such preoccupation with duality is nothing unusual in Latin America. From the Manichaeism of *Doña Bárbara* to the Protean heroes of Sarduy's novels, its literature is a chronicle of the divided self, of the pilgrim not at home but in perpetual voyage in search of origins. Indian folkways, African culture, pre-Columbian myth, and sixteenth-century Spanish traditions flow together through the open veins of Latin America under the parchment skin of fiction. Whereas our philosophers and sociologists strive to convince us of an imminent synthesis, our men of letters posit scission as the most fundamental element of the Latin American ethos. As Mario Vargas Llosa observes in *The Perpetual Orgy*:

All that exists gives the impression of being one and its double, life and things a disturbing repetition. In that binary world, one is two, that is to say, everything is one and its copy, sometimes identical, sometimes deformed; almost nothing exists by itself, just about everything duplicates itself in something that both confirms and denies it. (170)¹¹

Perpetually unresolved dualities are ubiquitous in the exuberant landscapes of Asturias's *neo-Indigenista* fiction, but it is the triad that provides him with a narrative armature. The structural foundation on which *Hombres de maíz* is constructed sits on three pinions, water, fire, and corn, and a similar three-pronged figure enters *Mulata* in the conflation of gold, excrement, and the devil. Each element in these two pyramids of symbols becomes fully clear only in relation to the other two, as in these works all traces of character and chronological development are obliterated and events do not fall in line in logical sequence.

Asturias dreams up a new kind of unifying principle for his *neo-Indigenista* novels on the basis of notions he picks up from his study of Maya-Quiché literature. As we know, the plot of the *Popol Vuh* – his main source of inspiration – does not develop in linear fashion either; the creation myth is interrupted and the seemingly unrelated tales of the cultural heroes Hunahpu and Xbalanque and their parents One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu are wedged into the narrative before the creation myth can come to a conclusion (Tedlock, *P.V.*, II, III). Because of this ostensible “interruption” and given the way characters seem to substitute for one another, J. A. Galaos's assessment of *Hombres de maíz* would seem to apply just as well to the narrative development of the Quiché-Maya Book of Genesis. “Sometimes,” writes this critic, “it resembles a series of stories strung together by means of a mere ethnic and geographic bond” (“Los dos ojos,” 131).¹²

What reads like a string of loosely connected stories to most turns out to be a carefully composed symphonic poem of great complexity. Asturias is the first to understand that the narrative flow of the Chichicastenango manuscript is contingent upon clusters of elements associated among themselves and anchored on the three ingredients that, according to the Maya, are necessary in order for creation to take place. These very

same ingredients – water, fire, and corn – become the symbols around which he will draft his own panegyric to the men of maize.

Even though the ambitious young student from Guatemala begins to study under Raynaud and Capitan shortly after arriving in Paris, Mayan mythology will not become a structuring device in his own work until he writes “Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral,” some time in the late 1920s. He will rethink and recast the architectural principles he was beginning to become familiar with as he composes the bits and pieces that will be joined to create *Hombres de maíz* (I am referring to “En la tiniebla del cañaveral” [1931], “Luis Garrafita” [ca. 1931], “Le sorcier aux mains noires” [1935], “Gaspar Ilóm” [1945], and “Machojón” [1949]). By the time *Hombres de maíz* is published, its author has made his own the stylistic devices that make possible the narrative flow in the *Popol Vuh* and devised for himself a complex structural scheme comparable only to the one Joyce had engineered for *Ulysses*. The characters and events of his new novel translate the transition from chaos to order as an evolution from the color yellow to the color white, from the number seven to the number thirteen, and from a period of nomadic matriarchy comparable to the Mayan Third Age to a patriarchal agricultural society akin to the one conceived by the most sophisticated civilization in Mesoamerica during their Fourth Age or classical period.

All of his *neo-Indigenista* fiction will be informed by the same elements – Mayan mythology, surrealist rhetoric, and, above all, his keenly developed sociopolitical consciousness – but the balance and proportion of ingredients will be different in each work he writes. For instance, the most obvious structural devices underlying the *Leyendas* are conspicuous borrowings from Breton, Tzara, and Eluard. Some elements of Mayan culture do enter into this work, but they tend to be used as cultural references and not as structural devices in the 1930 edition. By the time he writes *Hombres de maíz*, however, Asturias has fully grasped the tectonic principles of the Maya-Quiché manuscripts and makes full use of them, although – and this is a crucial issue – not before dressing them up with finery of his own making. By this I mean that while the narrative pinions upon which the structure of the novel is anchored are the same as

those used in the *Popol Vuh*, Asturias also allegorizes his own personal feelings concerning the unattainability of women and the problem of rejection that haunted him throughout his life.

When he writes *Mulata*, the allegorical dimension that plays such an important role in the eulogy to the Guatemalan Indian is given even greater preeminence, a fact that can be explained by his ever growing familiarity with and interest in psychoanalytic theory. Surrealist techniques and Mayan mythology are evident in many sections of the 1963 novel, but neither is as structurally important as they are, respectively speaking, in the *Leyendas de Guatemala* or in *Hombres de maíz*.

I have allowed the narrative technique Asturias gives weight to in each of his works to determine the focus of my own study. It is for this reason that I examine his integration of surrealist devices in Chapter 1 when I study the *Leyendas*. His application of Mayan mythology becomes the focus of my analysis of *Hombres de maíz* in Chapter 2, and I reserve a psychoanalytic approach for examining *Mulata de tal* in my third chapter. Despite these choices in emphasis on my part, it is essential to keep in mind that all the influences that shaped Asturias's unique literary style while he was living in Paris in the 1920s and early 1930s were to stay with him throughout his life. It should also be noted that while, stylistically speaking, he writes two very different types of novels, in terms of their thematic content both the *neo-Indigenista* fiction and the more conventional protest literature show the same sociopolitical concerns. All of his readers would have to agree that the former is, for all intents and purposes, a recasting of Guatemalan current events in a mode different from that of his more mimetic fiction. In reality, only the medium changes. He revamps his protest literature into an even more personal, uncompromising language such as the one used in *Mulata*, which many critics rightly describe as "poetic" (Galaos, "Los dos ejes"). It is in this type of writing – in which the means of communication become as important as the message itself – that Asturias shows himself to be truly innovative. The complex coding system of the *neo-Indigenista* fiction steers him away from the didactic tendency that weighs down his sociopolitical novels and frees him to write, as he said himself, "from the lips inward," without making any concessions to the reader (Harss, 96).¹³

Not making concessions to the reader has never stopped a writer from gaining recognition – not, at least, until Asturias came along. Since the publication of *Hombres de maíz*, the literary establishment has been blindly sitting on a widely misunderstood masterpiece that is not just a turning point in the history of the Latin American novel but of all world literature. This is not just idle praise. Asturias is actually the first Latin American author to break away from the mainstream of Western literature in order to create works of fiction that, while written in Spanish and borrowing many devices from the European literary tradition, bring a different world vision into the limelight. Marrying Western and non-Western techniques, he produces a new American idiom that is the best existing example of the cultural blend that typifies our continent.

No one denies, of course, that naturalistic fiction and especially the *novela de la tierra* have not done their share in portraying the uniqueness of American experience. But this they do by means of description and while wholeheartedly espousing a tradition that has nothing autochthonously American about it. It isn't until Asturias's "Los brujos de la tormenta primavera!" and most particularly *Hombres de maíz* that we come face to face with a literary language that can be rightfully defined as being uniquely ours in content as well as in form. And by unique I don't mean that it is exclusively indigenous, since this would not be a veritable reflection of Latin America's hybrid civilization, and Asturias was well aware of this. His isn't a mestizo literature in the sense Mariategui understood it either (i.e., a literature about Indians written by non-Indians) because it is neither folkloric nor an outsider's perception of reality. Then, what is it?

To begin with, it is a kaleidoscopic portrayal that includes three different world visions: the indigenous, the mestizo, and the European. Other *neo-Indigenista* authors have produced similar three-tiered portrayals, of course. José María Arguedas, Rosario Castellanos, and Manuel Scorza are names that come immediately to mind. As I have said earlier, the first grew to see the mestizo as the go-between through which the pure Indian might eventually become introduced to the modern world and save himself from the guile of Westerners by becoming familiar, after so many centuries, with the foreigners' culture.

Castellanos's portrayal of the Tzotzil Maya is complex and extraordinarily moving, but, as Martin Lienhard has taken pains to demonstrate, her efforts to "create" an Indian language only succeed in producing a bookish sort of discourse that reads like the *Popol Vuh* but has nothing whatsoever to do with the way Indians actually speak ("La legitimización indígena en dos novelas centroamericanas"). In that sense, then, her portrayal is somewhat artificial even though her characterization of Catalina Díaz Puiljá in *Oficio de tinieblas* is without a doubt the most thorough and complex study of Indian psychology to appear in a work of Latin American fiction.

When all is said and done, neither Castellanos nor Scorza incorporates structural devices from Indian manuscripts into their works of fiction. In other words, they both write European novels that portray Indians – as Mariátegui might have said, "from the outside looking in." Even Arguedas, with his enormous knowledge and profound understanding of Andean civilizations, always remained loyal to the typically Western vehicle that he chose as his main tool of expression.¹⁴

The only *neo-Indigenista* author who succeeds in creating a new type of syncretic novel in which narrative elements from both the Indian literary tradition and the European one are brought together is Asturias. He is, in every sense of the word, the inventor of a sub-genre that is, for the first time in history, authentically Latin American, no longer a more or less genial offspring of the European novelistic tradition.

His invention is not only structural, moreover. Philosophically speaking he is also the first to suggest that the only hope for salvaging the tottering civilization of Latin America lies in our dialogic society's ability to recognize and adopt the attributes that Indian culture has to offer: a sense of altruism, communal spirit, and respect for the environment. Indian values – and not a mestizo culture that parrots the hegemony in power – are the only corrective antidotes for the ruthlessness of commercial society and the selfishness it promotes. This is why Asturias represents the beliefs and morals of the indigenous community on a higher plane than those of the ruling class and convincingly argues that theirs is the model to be adopted and not the other way around. This is in turn the rea-

son for choosing to record the variegated origins of modern-day Guatemala and suggesting in the *Leyendas* that Indian culture is still intact – if half forgotten – under layers of rubble.

We can immediately see, moreover, how all of his *neo-Indigenismo* grows out of what is portrayed in the first collection of folktales. In them Asturias teaches us that the buried and multi-storied edifice of Indian culture must be unearthed and restored; this is exactly what Gaspar Ilóm fights for and what Goyo Yic succeeds in doing at the conclusion of *Hombres de maíz*. Celestino Yumí and the Mulata are unable to see the sense in the kind of communitarian values Yic strives to uphold, however. They identify with the foreigners' lust for gold, which is why the world they live in falls to pieces. This, in a nutshell, is the sense of Asturias's trilogy about Indian culture: Turning back to the country's cultural roots can only come after recognizing their validity and failing to do so is leading Guatemala to its doom.

After moving to Paris in 1924, it didn't take Asturias very long to recognize that the time of Mayan civilization had not passed, to be followed by the time of European civilization, but that the two could be made to parallel one another. This is why he writes six works of fiction in which the moral code of his Indian ancestors is actualized in modern garb and integrates their literary legacy into his writing. By cutting and pasting the past into the present, he joins the two ends of historical time into a circle and suggests that life in Mesoamerica need not continue to be a disruption from the ways of yesteryear. The wise ways of the Indian – the “Sabiduría indígena” he praises in his poem – are still within reach if we care to look and learn. The Indian has “survived every change” and is still around, teetering on the edge of destruction now that “history has brought mankind to that pinnacle on which the total obliteration of mankind is at last a practical possibility” (Brown, 307). It takes a tenacious and genial optimist like Asturias to show his countrymen that the victory of death is by no means impossible unless they do something to remedy the havoc they have wreaked upon themselves. With a bit of good luck and a lot of prodding, maybe, the medley of cultures in the Latin American melting pot might come to realize that the path to the future lies in the direction

of mutual tolerance and respect, not of rejection.¹⁵ And while they are at it, perhaps some of its members will recognize the need to learn from the experienced survivors of the first holocaust. When that day comes, the lesson of Central America's most forward-minded and past-oriented author will not have been in vain.

Notes

Most of the translations are mine, except as noted at the beginning of the Bibliography.

Introduction

- 1 *Tres de cuatro soles* was first published in French in a translation by Claude Couffon (Geneva: Ed. Albert Skira, 1971); the first Spanish edition appeared posthumously in 1977 (Mexico and Paris: Fondo de Cultura Económica and Editions Klincksieck).
- 2 Critics have not only been vague in assessing the merits of this masterpiece. The truth is that, until very recently, Asturias's first *neo-Indigenista* novel had been downright neglected. Such neglect jumps at the reader in Pedro de Andrea's authoritative bibliography published in the *Revista Iberoamericana* in 1966. Out of more than a thousand entries listed in this publication, only about twenty articles deal specifically with Asturias's blockbuster Indian saga.
- 3 In his revealing, and elegantly written, *Conversaciones con Miguel Angel Asturias*, Luis López Alvarez explains Asturias's reasons for accepting the appointment of ambassador to Paris: "Accepting the post of Guatemalan ambassador to Paris – from which he resigned in April 1970 when Méndez Montenegro left the country's presidency – brought Asturias the scathing criticism of many Latin American leftists. At the time, no one understood that Miguel Angel Asturias followed the advice of both Arbenz – whom he continued to view as his true president – and of his friends from the Guatemalan Labor party when he accepted the ambassadorship to Paris" (27).
- 4 With one exception (Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin nido* [1889]), the thirty-three novels studied by Meléndez are not works of social protest, even when they share a compassion for the conquered Indian and a sentimental interest in the folkloric aspects of his culture. The books that this author has chosen to study couple a purely sentimental interest for autochthonous Americans with an attachment to the traditions of the past. For this reason they fall under the aegis of *Indianismo* and not of *Indigenismo*. As it is widely

known, authors associated with the latter movement dwell on social protest and direct their attention to the contemporary rural Indian whom they view from the urban perspective characteristic of the bourgeois novel.

1 *Leyendas de Guatemala*

- 1 Asturias's thesis has been reedited by the Centre de Recherches de l'Institut d'Études Hispaniques (Paris, 1971). More recently, a fine bilingual edition (Spanish/English) with an introduction by Richard Callan was produced by the Center for Latin American Studies, Arizona State University (Tempe, 1977).
- 2 Asturias had daily and direct contact with Indians throughout his childhood. His maternal grandmother had a notions shop in the capital, and Indians were both suppliers and customers. This meant that after moving to her house at the age of seven the young boy carried a bit of the country back with him. Jimena Sáenz indicates how watching the Indians who came to his grandmother's house to sell their wares was always a subject of fascination for Asturias: "The child kept his eyes open; he was extremely interested in the variety of these people who would later be masterfully portrayed in his novels" (*Genio y figura*, 20)
- 3 The author of the *Leyendas* would make no bones about his penchant for mystification; in an article written for *El Imparcial* on August 23, 1930, he observes with a good sprinkling of humor: "Como buen chapín . . . confundo la realidad con la palabra" (As any true-born Guatemalan . . . I confuse reality with words [*Periodismo*, 440]).
- 4 I am specifically referring to part II, chap. 8, of *Madame Bovary*, generally referred to as "Les Comices agricoles." The double dialogue in Flaubert's novel can be found on pp. 215-217 of the 1986 Flammarion edition.
- 5 This is reported by Jimena Sáenz, although she qualifies Asturias's words by saying, "This is already part of the legend" (*Genio y figura*, 41). In *Conversaciones con Miguel Angel Asturias* the author revises his own version of the events and tells López Alvarez that Raynaud had simply stared at him throughout the first class and approached him afterwards to half ask, half affirm, "Vous êtes maya" (You are Mayan [75]).
- 6 Sexuality fraught with guilt is evident, for instance, in Goyo Yic's scene of "infidelity" when he discovers that "a woman who is truly loved cannot be seen" (*Hombres de maíz*, 133).
- 7 It is curious to note in this context that Giuseppe Bellini records how Asturias "does some travelling and visits almost all of Europe" during his stay in Paris but fails to indicate that this traveling is done in connection with his role in *Prensa Latina* (*Narrativa*, 20). Asturias's participation in the meetings has been alluded to by

- some critics (López Alvarez, for instance), but the implications of involvement had not been gone into in great detail before Cheymol's book appeared in print (*Conversaciones*, 87-89).
- 8 As Cheymol points out, neither of these articles has been translated (*Periodismo*, 88o).
 - 9 For instance, in the "Leyendas del Sombrerón" the narrator uses a rhetorical formulation characteristic of oral narrative when he states: "Y sucedió . . . Y sucedió, repito para tomar aliento, que por la pequeña y única ventana . . ." (And so it happened . . . and so it happened, I say once again to catch my breath, that through the small and only window . . . [43]).
 - 10 In her excellent book on the poetry of Dada and surrealism, Mary Ann Caws also points out that "the surrealists idealize 'Woman' as the most irrational, and therefore the most valuable, source of inspiration in an overlogical age" (58).
 - 11 Castelpoggi is another critic who suggests that Asturias revives the native American "surrealism" in his *Leyendas* (Miguel Angel Asturias, 36).
 - 12 Not to mention that the "pose" of *Indigenismo* is often a rationalization for deep-seated prejudices. As Guzmán Böckler and Herbert indicate, "*indigenismo* constitutes the fundamental ideology of the ruling class in a country with a colonial structure; viewed either as an anthropological theory or as an official political stance, it does not resolve social antagonisms; instead it masks it with a sort of mystification that allows the consolidation of a dubious despotism. This corresponds to an ideology that is Marxist in some ways, a theory that falsely expresses social reality in order to exercise control." These authors conclude their controversial observations about the movement adding that *Indigenismo* corresponds to "a particular phase of colonial dialectics in which the colonial settler has lost the good social conscience that allowed him to be openly racist or paternalistic and is forced to create a humanistic metaphysics ostensibly egalitarian and generous, one from which the objective, political and economic posture of antagonism has been carefully exorcised." (*Guatemala*, 122).
 - 13 In Mexico the focus on the Indian seen within his own cultural context is the domain of the so-called *Ciclo de Chiapas*, a masterful string of novels and short stories in which the action takes place in this southernmost region of the country. The authors whose work forms the Chiapas Cycle are Ricardo Pozas, Ramón Rubín, Carlo Antonio Castro, María Lombardo de Caso, and, above all, Rosario Castellanos, the recognized virtuoso of the group.
 - 14 "Asturias stops treating Indians . . . in documentary fashion in order to penetrate into their mythic world, the magic root, via the language spoken by these people. Borrowing their own language, Asturias saves them from anonymity, the kind of anonymity imposed by history" (Fuentes, "Situación," 19-20).

- 15 The first *Indigenista* novel is thought to be Narciso Aréstegui's *El padre Horán* (see Efraín Kristal's illuminating *The Andes Viewed from the City. Literary and Political Discourse on the Indian in Peru 1848-1930*).
- 16 Asturias's early and lasting recognition and appreciation of his country's mixed heritage is a very important issue. It is widely known that his lifelong aim was to redress the imbalance between exploiters and exploited, and for this reason, he will be a relentless critic of the Spanish and the *ladinos*, be they conquistadors or *hacendados* (as he declares in "La Arquitectura de la Vida Nueva": "La farsa que hasta la fecha distingue a las clases que llamamos preparadas hace que el país adelante muy poco a poco, casi insensiblemente" [The farce that up until now differentiates the classes we call educated is responsible for the country's slow, almost unnoticeable progress; *Periodismo*, 255]; and elsewhere he thunders, "El problema agrícola de nuestro país no puede resolverse con el criterio feudalista de señor y vasallos, disfrazados entre nosotros bajo las apariencias de patrón y mozos; su resolución debe buscarse en la necesidad de que el señor como el mozo posean lo que cultivan y nada más" [Our country's agricultural problems cannot be solved with feudalistic terms such as lords and vassals, disguised in our land as owners and servants. The solution must be found in requiring that both owner and servant own what they cultivate and nothing more; "La nacionalización de las tierras debe preocupar a los guatemaltecos," *Periodismo*, 259]). The anti-Spanish rhetoric, which is as apparent in these articles as it is in the *Leyendas*, must not lead readers to conclude that Asturias was vehemently and blindly anti-Spanish, however. Nothing could be further from the truth. The moral distinctions and social criticism that are ubiquitous in his writings must not be confused with racial or cultural discrimination vis-à-vis "madre España." Asturias was no less an admirer of it than he was of Mesoamerican cultures and it is no secret that his newspaper articles – many written in the months immediately preceding the publication of the *Leyendas* – are liberally sprinkled with the admiration that he felt for all things Spanish ("Burgos," August 5, 1929; "El Escorial," August 6; and "Madrid," August 22). In the last of these he observes, "De noche Madrid . . . hace que los que viven allí, se sientan maravillosos, es decir, madrileños" (By night Madrid . . . makes all the people who live there feel marvelous, that is to say, *madrileños* [373]) and goes on to argue that Latin Americans are indebted to Spain even in the showiness of their shop windows, "Even in that respect we are Spanish" [*Periodismo*, 373]). On the other hand, we need to highlight that the author of the *Leyendas* was not blindly admiring, either; he was simply lucid, which is no doubt why he writes, "The natural order of social reality cannot be altered," by

- which he means to suggest that it is futile, let alone impossible, to ignore or downgrade either of the cultures that inform the national character of his homeland. Mentalities can be changed, but not a country's demography ("Las sociedades sin razón de ser, II," *Periodismo*, 15-16).
- 17 Already on March 31, 1927, Asturias had written an article for *El Imparcial* in which "el hermano Pedro" figures as an idealistic predecessor of the Free University (Universidad Popular). Asturias's goal in this article is to underscore "la necesidad de educar al pueblo, de redimirlo de los vicios que sobre sus espaldas pesan" (the need to educate the people, to redeem them from the vices weighing on their shoulders ["Este hermano Pedro," *Periodismo*, 168-169]).
 - 18 This is why Asturias refers to his homeland as "una nación que no existe" (a country that doesn't exist ["Hacia una patria mejor," *El Imparcial*, January 25, 1927]). In this and many articles the young author affirms, "Nuestro país está por hacer" (Our country has yet to be made" [*Periodismo*, 156]). The reasons for this are twofold: because property is in the hands of foreigners, and because "el guatemalteco desprecia los zapatos, las costumbres, el idioma y el haber espiritual de su país" (people from Guatemala disdain the shoes, the customs, the language and the spiritual assets of their own country ["Hacia una patria mejor," April 18, 1927, *Periodismo*, 174-175]).
 - 19 This is a point that he constantly harps on in the editorials entitled "Hacia una patria mejor" (*Periodismo*, 156, 174).
 - 20 Asturias declares to Luis Harss, "Indians spend their lives looking back toward the past, never forward," a fact that sheds considerable light on the opening chronological volley of his own cycle of tales (*Los nuestros*, 111).
 - 21 The author-creator is a central feature of *Hombres de maíz* (cf. "Tall Tales Made to Order" in Chapter 2 of this book) and plays a very important role in "Cuculcán," as well as in the "Leyenda de la Campana Difunta" where the author links the removal of organs with a bell that does not toll, a sculptor who does not sculpt, and a painter who does not paint.
 - 22 Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán. A Translation*, 151-52.
 - 23 Eric Thompson points out that the number three is probably a fire symbol when it appears as three circles in triangular arrangement (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 277). He also indicates that, in a different context, the "three dots refer to the god of number 3, who is a rain deity" and, further, "that the number three has an aquatic connotation, for the god of that number is a storm god" (144, 277). Asturias was doubtlessly familiar with the double status of the number three in Mayan mythology and exploits this ambiguity to introduce the elements of creation and destruction that

- are ubiquitous in the *Popol Vuh* and will likewise play a major role in his own *Hombres de maíz* many years later.
- 24 It is true that Breton readily condemns the kind of "art for art's sake," which has no bearing on the world, but the truth is, his own poetry tends to be narcissistic and self-referential, in any case, not as politically committed as that of Asturias.
- 25 In other words, allegorically speaking, the novice is tempted by vanity because her braid is so beautiful.
- 26 As he enjoins his countryfolk: "Nuestro desprecio y nuestra ignorancia por lo nuestro raya en criminal . . . los guatemaltecos diríanse que nos hemos propuesto olvidar hijos de quién somos. ¿Puede ser Guatemala una nación próspera cuando sus hijos la ignoran espiritualmente?" (Our contempt and ignorance of our own culture borders on the criminal . . . one might say that the people of Guatemala have made a point to forget whose children we are. Can Guatemala ever become a prosperous nation when its children ignore their spiritual legacy? ["Hacia una patria mejor," *Periodismo*, 175]). Here, as in all his writings, Asturias goads the people of Guatemala to recognize the rich Indian heritage they do their best to forget: "Materialmente, nos despreciamos y nos ignoramos;" he thunders, "espiritualmente, nos ignoramos y nos despreciamos" (Materially speaking, we scorn ourselves and are unmindful of ourselves; spiritually, we are unaware and filled with self-contempt [*Periodismo*, 175]).
- 27 Even more than journalism, the vehicle that allowed Asturias to carry out his self-appointed mission as educator was his work in the field of fiction. In his opinion, teaching a moral lesson was the noble role of books. "Los periódicos diarios son informativos," he writes on December 15, 1928, "quedando al libro la noble función de adoctrinar" (Newspapers provide news while the book's noble task is to indoctrinate ["Ojo nuevo," *Periodismo*, 310]).
- 28 During the 1929 season Asturias cannot help noticing the stiff competition that the French theater faces vis-à-vis new forms of entertainment such as the "talkies," music halls, and American-style theater ("Teatro 1930," October 17, 1929, [*Periodismo*, 339; and "El problema escénico," March 12, 1932, *Periodismo*, 469]). He ponders over the future of theater and feels that the genre must once again turn to masks in order to provide a dimension of "magic" and "enchantment" ("En la jaula de la Torre Eiffel," January 1, 1932, *Periodismo*, 465). Clearly, he writes "Cuculcán" in response to these needs.
- 29 If we say that Asturias was inundated with facts and notions regarding the Maya, is it accurate to use the translations and discoveries that have appeared in print after his own work in order to interpret the system of symbols he engineers in his own fiction? The truth is, it is not only fair, it is accurate to do so – with some measure of discretion – because, as we have begun to demon-

strate, Asturias knew a lot more about the Maya than he ever let on. To grasp the full tenor of his invention, we must venture into the fields of ethnology and anthropology with the help of any and all findings that convincingly demonstrate that the author of the *Leyendas* was well versed in Mayan mythology. It is evident that much of Asturias's secret code has remained a mystery because Dennis Tedlock's translation of the *Popol Vuh* had not appeared in print until recently. A virtual revolution has taken place in the last quarter century in our knowledge of the New World's most advanced, sophisticated, and subtle civilization. This intellectual turnabout has taken place on many fronts, but most specially in epigraphy and iconography since a Soviet scholar by the name of Valentin Knorosov revived the long-discredited "alphabet" written down in the sixteenth century by Bishop Landa, and went on to propose phonetic-syllabic readings of various glyphs in the Dresden Codex. All subsequent research on the subject has confirmed the essential correctness of the hypothesis that the Maya could write everything they wanted to purely phonetically, but never did this in complete form because of the sacredness and prestige of the ideograms or logograms. The pace of research on the dynastic inscriptions of the classic Maya increased after 1960, as younger scholars using the historical approach entered the field. All of the lines of inquiry concerning the Maya came together in the conferences of the 1970s and 1980s that were held at Dumbarton Oaks, Princeton, and Palenque. Linguists, epigraphers, art historians, archaeologists, and ethnologists formed a remarkable collaboration that broke new ground for Mayan studies. This has ushered in what has come to be known as the age of Mayan literacy in which Linda Schele, Mary Ellen Miller, David Friedel, and Dennis and Barbara Tedlock have actively participated and continue to participate in the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphs, a momentous event that has instigated a rethinking of our perceptions about the Mayan world and its literature. A case in point of the latter is Dennis Tedlock's authoritative translation of the *Popol Vuh* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985). This copiously annotated translation sheds light not only on the symbolic meaning of events referred to in the Chichicastenango manuscript, it also makes us aware that Asturias was familiar with the sphere of action of many Mesoamerican gods and with the meaning of many words in Quiché.

- 30 We know from Tedlock that the mother-father couple typically functions as complementary metonyms that together produce the sense of "parent" without any final reduction of the difference between motherhood and fatherhood; "in the *Popol Vuh*, the composite term thus produced is used as a metaphor for the gods called Maker and Modeller . . . even though they are all males" (350-351). Asturias will often cast creation pairs – such as Gaspar

- Ilóm and María la Lluvia (in *Hombres*) – and, in some instances, will confer androgynous features upon them (Goyo Yic becomes a female opossum in the same novel, for instance).
- 31 According to Antonio de Ciudad Real, Hurakan is sometimes referred to as the *itz* or “drop of liquid” of the sky, though he causes torrential rains (*Diccionario de Motul*). This would explain Asturias’s choice of words (“una gota de su inmenso caudal” [my emphasis] *Leyendas*, 94).
 - 32 Although he is the sun incarnate, Hunahpu is also one of the nine Lords of Night since he passes through the underworld before sallying forth from darkness each day at dawn. For this reason, he is linked with the number nine in the Mayan codices (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 246).
 - 33 That is, they don’t repeat their parents’ errors. They send the mosquito ahead of them and it tells them the names of the evil Lords of Death before they even arrive in Xibalbá. According to a widespread Indian belief, knowing their names is tantamount to having power over them.
 - 34 As Sáenz observes, “Asturias is no dramatist, and in spite of his efforts the action freezes over; the narrator feels uncomfortable dressed in the finery of theater” (*Genio y figura*, 86).
 - 35 Three curtains drawn three times apiece gives us a total of nine, which, as we have seen, is one of the numbers emblematic of the sun during its nightly journey through the underworld (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 246).
 - 36 “In Yucatec, a youth of marriageable age was known as “maize plant coming into flower” (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 284).
 - 37 The complex association between all of the elements cited in this list is traced by Thompson in a very different context. The noted archaeologist begins by pointing out that the *kan* cross (*kan* is the Yucatec word for “yellow”) is “quite frequently worn in the head-dresses of the rain gods” and, in addition, “is prominent on the cheek of the only head variant of the day sign Muluc, “water” (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 275). This same glyph also appears on the head from which the maize plant grows on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross, Palenque (*ibid.*, 276). Elsewhere, Raphaël Girard points out that the color yellow is the symbol of the Third Age, which is to say, the period of preeminence of the moon goddess Ixquic (*Le Popol Vuh*, 136).
 - 38 In Mayaland the moon goddess is traditionally connected with bodies of water. Thompson points out that this association finds “confirmation in the Central American belief that the moon goddess resided in Tlalocán, abode of the rain gods.” He adds that “in mainland Mexican art, the moon symbol frequently serves as a container for water” (*Maya History and Religion*, 245).
 - 39 Like the Mayan “daykeepers,” the *Gran Lengua* is convinced not that the time of Mayan civilization has passed, to be followed by

the time of European civilization, but that the two have begun to run parallel to one another. This is why his *neo-Indigenista* fiction is always the dramatization of an ancient legacy in modern garb. The 1930 edition of the *Leyendas de Guatemala* teaches the need for a new look at the past. "Los Brujos de la tormenta primaveral" and "Cuculcán" introduce this past by portraying Mayan culture and its system of references.

2 *Hombres de maíz*

- 1 As Gerald Martin indicates, "Asturias knew that in order to know who we are as we move into the future, we have to know who we were in the past, that is to say, who were those who came before us; and because the crux of the matter is not to grasp the sense of history but to change its course, if we want to claim the future for ourselves, we must first reclaim the past" (*O.C.*, IV, xlvi).
- 2 The French poet once told Asturias: "You must not stay here. I assure you that you write things about which we, Europeans, don't even dream. You come from a world in the making, your spirit seethes with an excitement like that of the soil, the volcanoes, and nature. You must rapidly return over there so as not to lose it. Otherwise, you run the risk of becoming here, in Paris, a mere imitator, an author of no importance" (interview with M. A. Asturias conducted by Komnen Becirovic in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 43, January 15-31, 1968; my translation).
- 3 Actually, as Marc Cheymol maintains, "'Ulysses' return is . . . nothing other than the vindication of his loyalty to a culture and to his parents' civilization." Asturias never accepted frenchification and "knew how to say 'no' to all the possibilities of assimilation that came his way" on the Continent (*Periodismo*, 850).
- 4 Luis Harss describes these poems as "attempts to make the phantoms of Indian legend live in wordplay and surrealistic pantomime" and compares them to the "verbal preoccupation" that typifies the era of Joyce, Fargue, and Gertrude Stein (Harss and Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream*, 77).
- 5 In articles that include "La nacionalización de las tierras debe preocupar a los guatemaltecos" (May 8, 1928), and "Indispensable necesidad de organizar el partido político de los campesinos," I and II (May 16 and May 21, 1928), the forward-minded author of *La arquitectura de la vida nueva* comes up with a succinct formula for putting a stop to the land drain: "¿Cómo haremos el rescate de lo perdido?" he writes, "Primero: no dejando que se nos quite más. Segundo: no dejando que se nos quite más. Tercero: no dejando que se nos quite más" (How will we rescue what has been lost? First: not allowing that any more be taken from us. Second: not allowing that any more be taken from us. Third: not allowing that any more be taken from us [*Periodismo*, 258]). Not only does he argue vehemently in favor of rescuing the nation's land from the hands of

foreign companies, he also insists that giving land to the peasants is the best way to alleviate the country's national deficit and capital imbalance. "El pequeño agricultor," he proclaims, "y ojalá lo fueran todos, es el camino de salvación de Guatemala" (The small farmer, and how I wish they all were, is the road to Guatemala's salvation [*Periodismo*, 259]).

- 6 "El Lucas" and "La venganza del indio" are both in Claude Couffon's *Miguel Angel Asturias: Novelas y cuentos de juventud* (Paris, 1971). Couffon indicates that "El Lucas" "must have been published, according to Miguel Angel Asturias, in a Havana journal whose name he has forgotten" (16). "La venganza del indio" appeared in *El Imparcial* on May 21, 1926.
- 7 Both of these stories are included in the appendixes to the *Edición crítica de Hombres de maíz* (O.C., IV, 250-256).
- 8 The genesis of *Hombres de maíz* is described in great detail in Martin's outstanding section, "Los antecedentes biográficos y literarios" in *Hombres de maíz. Edición crítica de obras completas*, IV, lviii-lxv. "Le sorcier aux mains noirs" is included as an Appendix in the same volume (257-261).
- 9 Although he has since changed his mind, Seymour Menton's first assessment of *Hombres de maíz* was harsh in the extreme. The author of the very influential *Historia crítica de la novela guatemalteca* (1960) argues that, "Despite the author's attempt to fuse together all the separate plot lines, this novel lacks the great unity of *El señor presidente*. The fault does not lie in the execution but in the overall conception of the novel. Asturias seeks to break away from the traditional concept of the novel. There are no protagonists in the entire novel. There are no conflicts left to resolve. There is no narrative development. . . . *Hombres de maíz* is inferior to *El señor presidente* because of the artificial method the author uses to tie loose ends together" (*Historia crítica*, 221-222). Writing a few years after Menton, Enrique Anderson Imbert was equally critical of Asturias's narrative invention. "*Hombres de maíz*," he maintains, "consists of a series of tales in which real and legendary elements are brought together, a disharmonious counterpoint because the author failed to conceptualize his own artistic goal" (*Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana*, t. II, 226).

Probably the most damning criticism of the novel has been that of José Antonio Galaos who feels *Hombres de maíz* "belongs to the novelistic genre because it is there that we include anything not readily classifiable in the field of literature." Adding insult to injury, this critic goes on to note, "At times [*Hombres de maíz*] seems to be a series of short stories strung together on the basis of a shared geographic and ethnic backdrop; at others, it reads merely as an evocation of colorful characters. Divided into six sections, each named after its own protagonist, all could well be independent short stories. This way of conceiving the narration has the

danger, substantiated in this instance, of becoming repetitive and even irksome. . . . Moreover, the author's knack for grouping words together for no reason other than their phonetic similarity in an effort to create musical prose has led him to create a play on sensations rather than on sounds—one that, for the most part, has no reason for being." Galaos moves in for the kill with the following biased value judgments: "to find boring pages in *Hombres de maíz* is extremely easy, especially in the first half of the book" and "*Hombres de maíz* is, therefore, one big muddle in which things as different as poetry and the most unbearable prosaicness have been thrown together, [a book] in which the greatest defects are combined with the most audacious innovations many of which, pushed to the extreme, produce hostility and tire the reader" (Galaos, "Los dos ejes," 13-34). Needless to say, the effect of declarations such as these in widely read books and literary journals has been disastrous for Asturias's reputation and has created a veritable smokescreen around his most imaginative novel.

- 10 Besides the "Gaspar Hijóm" article in *El Imparcial* of January 4, 1927, three historical uprisings are no doubt seminal in the final elaboration of the first chapter in Asturias's novel. In 1817, a man of royal Quiché lineage, Anastasio Tzul, declared himself king. He led an uprising against the *ladinos* in Totonicapán but was defeated. Almost a century later, in 1898, the K'anjobal revolted in San Juan Ixcay. As is the case in *Hombres de maíz*, most of the Indians in the area were put to the stone with the exception of a deaf-mute who escaped and was able to warn the troopers. The army was quick to retaliate and take possession of the Indians' land after the revolt had been suppressed. Finally, in 1943, groups of Indians in Patzicia took up arms against the large landowners who had confiscated their property. Ubico cut short their revolt but not before the media had gotten hold of the details.
- 11 Richard Callan has elucidated this section of the novel by pointing out the relationship between the Tecún's grandmother and the goddess Toci. "The sacrifice of the entire Zacatón family by decapitation," he writes, "was carried out by the Tecún brothers as part of a sorcery to relieve old Yaca their mother of a bad case of hiccoughs. A counterpart of *Tlazolteotl* is the old earth and corn mother, *Toci*, 'our grandmother.' The Tecún boys call Yaca, 'mi nana,' which means indifferently mother or grandma. In honor of *Toci* Aztec women were beheaded to signify the plucking of corn ears. This sacrificial rite is conveyed by the eight heads of the Zacatón which the Tecún brothers brought home and presented to Yaca" (*Miguel Angel Asturias*, 86). What Callan does not say is that in Mayan hieroglyphic writing, the corn god's head is used as a symbol for the number eight, a fact that further corroborates the nexus between the sacrifice of the eight members of the Zacatón

- household and the corn harvest (Thompson, *Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization*, 265).
- 12 It is worth noting that in the *Popol Vuh* Hunahpu and Xbalanque appear as fish five days after their bones have been ground and the powder spilled into the river in Xibalba. The twins' incarnations as fish is an intermediary step before they take human form once again. Once they do, they appear disguised as vagabond dancers and actors. The whole metamorphosis can be compared to the evolution that takes place in Asturias's novel: Gaspar jumps into the river and is compared to "a small fish"; he disappears from the action and his role as protagonist is taken over by Goyo Yic, who, like the twins in the *Popol Vuh* becomes a vagabond until he returns to Pisigüilito.
 - 13 "Contemporary Quichés regard the full moon as a nocturnal equivalent of the sun, pointing out that it has a full disk, is bright enough to travel by, and goes clear across the sky in the same time it takes the sun to do the same thing" (Tedlock, 46). This would shed light on Asturias's design; it is evident that his intention was to portray the Indian couples in *Hombres de maíz* as emblematic of sun and moon, which is to say, as alter egos of Hunahpu and Xbalanque.
 - 14 Raphaël Girard points out the same association between moon and water in his book, *Le Popol Vuh, histoire culturelle des maya-quichés*: "Ixquic personifies the moon goddess, model for and patroness of adult women, but also the goddess of water, closely linked to rain" (133).
 - 15 Gaspar is decapitated, metaphorically speaking, on p. 4 of *Hombres de maíz*: "His head had fallen to the ground like a potsherd broken into fragments of thought. . . . The liquor didn't decapitate him because it was liquor but because it was the water of war." Hunahpu loses his head much more literally when the lords of the underworld test him by having him spend the night inside Bat House (part III). To protect themselves from the razor-sharp bat wings, the twins "just slept in their blowgun." When the bats were no longer moving, one of the boys crawls to the end of the blowgun. Suddenly, as he is looking out the muzzle to see if it has dawned, "his head was taken off by a snatch-bat, leaving Hunahpu's body still stuffed inside" (*P.V.*, 143). Eric Thompson explains that "beheading is especially associated with deities of vegetation in Central Mexico" and refers to a sacrificial scene in *Codex Dresden* (plate 5) in which an impersonator of the maize god has been beheaded (*Maya History and Religion*, 288).
 - 16 The fish is one of Hunahpu's alter egos embodying the maize god during his journey through the underworld (Girard, *Le Popol Vuh*, 183, 199).
 - 17 The twins use fire to roast an earth-coated bird; when the giant eats it, he loses his strength and is doomed (*P.V.*, 101).

- 18 One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu fail the fire test inside Dark House (*P.V.*, 112-113).
- 19 One of the Quiché epithets for the *Popol Vuh* is *Camuhibal*, which literally means "Our Place in the Shadows." This epithet actually refers to the period (lasting about two-thirds of the book) before the first sunrise is seen. The period that begins after the sunrise is referred to as "the Dawn of Life." Tedlock elucidates the meaning of both epithets in the following sentence: "The implication of 'shadows' in the present epithet is that the light of dawn and of sunrise were really there (somewhere) all along, but that 'our' position as humans with respect to this light was such that we remained in darkness" (354). Clearly, all but the epilogue of Asturias's novel corresponds to this period of darkness before the first beings are made out of maize; the references to proliferation and abundance in the last section of *Hombres de maíz* confirm that the ending of the novel is meant to be seen as "the Dawn of Life."
- 20 Readers should keep in mind that in the *Popol Vuh* the two epithets for Hunahpu and Xbalanque are *uuch* and *utiu* (opossum and coyote) when they are in their guise as vagabond dancers and magicians. This is proof of the link between Goyo (opossum) and Nicho (coyote) and of the fact that they function as avatars of the sun god in Asturias's novel.
- 21 According to a Mopan, Kekchi, and Pokomchi myth quoted by Eric Thompson, "Maize lay hidden beneath a great rock, only the leaf-cutting ants which had found a small crack on the rock leading to the supply knew of it." [But] "one day the fox found and tasted some grains of maize dropped by the ants [and] he followed them" (*Maya History and Religion*, 349).
- 22 That is, the triad.
- 23 "The postman had been carried to the hospital, because he was taken bad, poisoned" (188).
- 24 Alegría argues that Asturias's "social realism, in spite of his declarations to the contrary, is not optimistic" and mistakenly maintains that this author "doesn't offer a single solution that could fill his work with revolutionary dynamism" ("Miguel Angel Asturias," 60).
- 25 Gaspar and Goyo are associated with water because they are both likened to fish, the very animal that represents, as we have seen, the maize god during his journey through the underworld. While in prison, Goyo and other inmates are referred to as "*hombres peces*," which Martin translates as "fishlike" (308), although the term Asturias uses in Spanish is exactly the one that appears in his own translation of the *Popol Vuh*: "Fishmen" (or *Vinac car* in the original Quiché) (*P.V.*, Asturias and González de Mendoza trans., 81).
- 26 All Indian characters in Asturias's novel are, in a very real sense, parts of a whole unit just like their model Hunahpu (for example,

- One and Seven Hunahpu embody, as one entity, all possible days bearing the name Hunahpu; cf. Tedlock, 353).
- 27 Asturias will explore this legend more fully in *Mulata de tal*, as we shall see in Chapter 3.
- 28 Female cruelty is also a recurrent theme of Asturias's early poetry. Women in his poems are not only disdainful and unattainable, they are also portrayed by means of highly unusual images, as Jack Himelblau has duly noted ("Love, Self and Cosmos"). In his poem "Angustia" (1924), for instance, the young author uses the image of a branch (*rama*) as a symbol for womanhood. Himelblau argues that this poem fails because the image is inappropriate since "we generally envision the feminine sex as a soft, round, sensual object or as a blossom or as a fruit. Rarely do we project her in our minds as a stiff, knotted, barbed branch" (247). There is no doubt that the branch as a symbol of femininity is highly unorthodox, especially when we consider that the poet writes, "esa rama verde cómo me lastima" (that green branch, how it hurts me). However, if Asturias does indeed have an unconventional perception of womanhood – as his writings seem to demonstrate – then the image of the wounding branch is revealing exactly *because* of its very inappropriateness.
- 29 The unattainability of women is a major theme of Asturias's poetry. Addressing a girlfriend in "Angustia," the poet complains, "El hambriento grita y tú no le das" (The hungry man cries out and you won't give him any [*El Imparcial*, November 22, 1924, 3]). In "Contacto," even though the need for love is satisfied, the lover still declares, "siento tu ser . . . y estás distante" (I feel your being . . . and you are far [*El Imparcial*, May 10, 1929, 3]). In "Soledad frente al mar" (*Sien de alondra*, 136), he laments, "los amores son grandes soledades" (love is one big loneliness), whereas in "Todo se va a quedar," the regret is that "no hay amor sin olvido" (there is no love without forgetfulness [*Studium*, II, 10–11, October–November 1923, 69; republished in *El Imparcial*, November 13, 1924, 3, and in condensed form in *Sien de alondra*, 19]). Finally, in "Gozo de sílabas felices," love is referred to as "imposible y grato" (impossible and pleasurable [*El Imparcial*, December 3, 1927, section III, 5]).
- 30 As one aficionado of cultural anthropology in the novel explains, "Men who are deserted by these 'bitten' women, as they are commonly called . . . turn away from goodness . . . they see reproduced before their eyes, in that stone which once was a person, the image of the woman who abandoned her home, and who begins to call, all this so that the man, blinded by love, will rush forward to the joyful rendezvous, oblivious of the ravine, or chasm, which in that very moment swallows him whole" (175).
- 31 This study, entitled "The Quest for the Feminine," is the fifth chapter of *Miguel Angel Asturias* (New York: Twayne, 1970).

- 32 In an article published in *El Imparcial* and entitled "Andrés Eloy Blanco, alto poeta de hoy," Asturias declares, "La poesía es adivinación y en escuchándola se pasa a nosotros su fluido y nos hace adivinar las cosas, penetrar los secretos del universo en relación con los secretos del hombre" (Poetry is a form of divination, while listening to it, its fluid is transmitted to us allowing us to guess things, to penetrate the secrets of the universe that are linked with man's own secrets [May 14, 1932, 3]). That poetry is a revealing medium about man and his psyche is made amply evident when we read the author's dramatizations of his own phobias and fetishes.
- 33 "Move, man, you look dead! . . . and he moved and Sheet was dead, a short time back, a long time back, it did not matter, after death the first minute is already eternity . . . his eyes open . . . yes . . . that had fooled her" (*Mulata*, 303).
- 34 In *Hombres de maíz* this rivalry is alluded to through Asturias's alter ego, the teller of tales, Hilario Sacayón. In a very revealing episode having to do with questions of paternal legacy and the hegemony over language, but equally referring to all shared and mutually desired possessions between father and son, Hilario reflects, "Afterwards, quieting remorse, he considered his ingratitude as a natural process of the son annulling the father, that is to say, putting himself in his place" (194-195).
- 35 When we examine the history of Western narrative, we immediately discover that the greatest schism in its development takes place when authors such as Mallarmé, Joyce, and Artaud scale down or even abrade the *symbolique* by transgressing all the conventions it imposes, and allow the characteristically maternal *sémiotique* to flood back into their discourse (*Polylogue*, 16). We think immediately of Joyce's punning, word association, use of homonyms, and vocalizations (in the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*, for example) as we witness the deployment of similar effects in the work of Asturias (the opening of the "María Tecún" chapter and the apocalypse scene in *Mulata de tal*).
- 36 That is, all of them are forces that debunk the establishment, conventions, or even reason.
- 37 In his "Loas a Santa María del Rosario" the virgin that is praised seems more human in the eyes of the poet by virtue of her dark skin, "Humaniza tu rostro tu color de morena" (Your dark skin makes your face more human), and worthier for being simultaneously mother and virgin, "Fuiste Madre, Señora, sin dejar de ser virgen" ("You were a Mother, Lady, all while being a virgin"). Santa María is praised through images of nature portrayed as weapons wielded by the poet. It is interesting to note that the natural elements alluded to (all of them plants) are conversant in Indian languages: "En las hojas del maíz, espadas que hablan maya, mi canto . . . / En las hojas del izote, puñales que hablan mame, mi

- canto . . . / En las hojas de la caña de azúcar, altas lanzas, mi canto . . .” (On the maize leaves, swords that speak Maya, my song . . . / On the aloe leaves, daggers that speak *Mame*, my song . . . / On the sugarcane leaves, tall spears, my song . . .) and, also, that the plant that measures the virgin’s existence should be the rose bush, or *rosales*: “Los rosales son relojes de rosas que señalan tus horas” (The rosebushes are clocks made of roses telling a time that is yours). It is no coincidence that Asturias’s mother’s name should also be Rosales and I don’t think I am stretching my interpretation by suggesting that the poet equates María, his mother, with María, *the* mother (as he equates Miguelita de Acatán with the “Heavenly Queen” [*Hombres de maíz*, 219]). The equation is probably subconscious, but it allows him to praise the Indian features that in his opinion make both venerable.
- 38 It is also interesting to note that Asturias meets his second wife scarcely three months after his mother’s death, in July 1948 (he used to say that María, his mother had sent her from heaven [“enviado del cielo”]). The new wife’s name, Blanca, is not without a nexus with his mother’s own patronymic Rosales (the white rose as an emblem of virtue), a link that sheds some light on the opening verse of an early poem to Blanca where Asturias admits, “Tu presencia desafía mi esplendor de hombre / amenazado por la espina” (Your presence defies my manly splendor / threatened by the thorn [“Mujer del paraíso”]).
- 39 This chapter deserves to be referred to as “Revelations,” for it is here that most of the novel’s mysteries are elucidated.
- 40 The tension between the sexes that is apparent in all Asturias’s *neo-Indigenista* fiction is mitigated during the writing phase that sees the conclusion of *Hombres de maíz*, a novel that comes together in the period immediately following the death of the author’s mother and is fueled by his newly discovered passion for Blanca Mora y Araujo. Meeting Blanca marks the beginning of a healing period in Asturias’s affective life. Typical of an author who tended to translate his emotions into art, this new emotional stability is reflected in the passionate love relationship between a mature man and woman that is described in *Viento fuerte* (1950), the novel he completes scarcely one year after meeting Doña Blanca.
- 41 Gerald Martin, for one, indicates, “vulgarity and eroticism, together with violence, set the tenor of the novel” (my emphasis; 405).
- 42 This would explain why intercourse is practically banned from the *neo-Indigenista* novels and why the lack of sexual contact is praised in poems such as “La primera noche:” “La planta sin frutos es bella, es bella la cabra sin cabro, [. . . es bella] la estrella doncella sin observador” (The barren fruit tree is pleasing to behold, and lovely the goat with no partner, the virgin star in utter solitude.)
- 43 This critic feels that Asturias’s “early works poignantly and coherently record a forlorn conception of love” and that, even in his

- youth, "Miguel Angel spied upon love with a pronounced sense of hopelessness" (243-244).
- 44 As Thompson points out, "Cave worship, a highly important factor in ancient Middle America, was a third focus of Mayan religious life. Many vestiges, both of offerings and of religious architecture . . . occur in caves, and pilgrimages to certain caves continue to this day in areas to which European influences have not penetrated in strength" *Maya History and Religion*, 183.) The worship of ancient gods in cave ceremonies is also described in great detail in Rosario Castellanos's masterful novel, *Oficio de tinieblas*.
- 45 Nicho is told the tale of creation according to the *Popol Vuh*: "The wizards announce that they are not men of wood . . . and they grant them passage to the flatlands, where the maize in all its forms awaits them" (301).
- 46 Asturias is very clear on this point even as the novel begins. When Gaspar and his wife, María, make love, we are told, "The spasm took them far beyond him, far beyond her, to where he ceased to be just himself and she ceased to be just herself to become species, tribe, a stream of sensations" (4).
- 47 Asturias's social concerns were evinced as early as his dissertation on *El problema social del indio*. In terms of idealism he went one step farther in 1928 by publishing a series of conferences described as "consejos" about mental and social hygiene designed to educate his countrymen, most specially the Indians. These were entitled *La arquitectura de la vida nueva* (Guatemala: Goubaud y Cía, 1928). It is easy to see how the moral content of *Hombres de maíz* (i.e., the respect of tradition and of the land) was a transcription in fiction of themes that preoccupied Asturias from his earliest years as a student and throughout his life.
- 48 The legend that informs Asturias's most notorious character is referred to by Francisco Romero Rodas in his fascinating *Hop-Cotzih*. According to it, during the conquest of Guatemala by the Spanish and after burning the city of Gumarcaah, the Quiché sovereigns Oxip-Quieh and Belehep Tzi handed over to the conqueror all the most beautiful women. Among them was the widow of Tecún Uman, commander of the Quiché army. She was offered to one of the right-hand men of Pedro de Alvarado who baptized her María with the addition of her dead husband's name, "Tecún." Rather than seeing herself possessed by the murderers of her husband, she chose to run away. One day after much wandering, she arrived at the foot of the Pixababah to beg for the end of her people's suffering. Her new "husband" was not far behind, however, feeling shortchanged and angry. When María Tecún saw that they had almost caught up with her, she climbed to the summit of the mountain and in full view of the astonished men who were pursuing her, she jumped into the void while letting out a blood-curdling

- shriek of defiance. According to the legend, the white cloak she wore around her shoulders became the thick fog that covers the rocky summits. Since that day, the oratory-rock took her name. The Quiché and Cakchiquel of the region name her with the utmost respect, "Nima Caté Pixababah María Tecún" (Nima Caté means "great lady") (Romero Rodas, 72-73).
- 49 María's departure is capital to Asturias's masterplan since it sets off the evolution of the blind Goyo Yic who, both factually and metaphorically, is given sight. A beggar dependent on his wife in chap. X, Goyo becomes a corn farmer with a sense of vision by the time we reach the epilogue. For this reason, his textual journey should be seen as an allegory of the historical evolution Asturias wished for his people, as a transition from the nomadic wanderings characteristic of the Mayan matriarchal society of the Third Age to the patriarchal agricultural society that is the model of the Fourth Age and summit of Maya-Quiché civilization.
- 50 I am freely borrowing Austin's terms in this instance because I am convinced that what Asturias did with words throughout his life – persuade, convince, and educate – is exactly what the English philosopher launches into in his William James Lectures delivered in 1955 and later published as *How to Do Things with Words*. To begin with, for both Austin and Asturias there are many senses "in which to say something is to do something" (101). Austin labels a message having direct consequence on the actions a "perlocutionary act." And Asturias, even though he probably did not know the term, conceived his entire literary idiom on the notion that language not only could but must convince and was the best tool at his disposal with which to bring about the transformation of his people in the direction he advocated. The agricultural community he portrays in the epilogue of *Hombres de maíz* wills and foreshadows the land reforms of both Arévalo's and Jacobo Arbenz's governments designed to end latifundios and semifeudalistic practices and allowing thousands of Guatemalan peasants to own and cultivate their own lands for the first time in centuries.
- 51 The network of signifieds characteristic of the poetic sign has been discussed, among others, by Julia Kristeva (*Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, 255) and Jean-Louis Houdebine for whom "the characteristic of all poetic language is that the process of producing meaning is found at all levels of writing" (*Portrait des Meidosems*, d'Henri Michaux," 4).
- 52 This is the theme of many *Indigenista* novels. Among the most noteworthy examples to come to mind are Mario Monteforte Toledo's *Entre la piedra y la cruz* [1948] and Ramón Rubín's *El Callado Dolor de los Tzotziles* [1949]).
- 53 We need to emphasize that in Mesoamerica the ant is typically portrayed as benefactor of the cultural heroes. In the *Popol Vuh* this insect is the ally of Hunahpu and Xbalanque. When as chil-

- dren their half-brothers One Monkey and One Artisan put them on an anthill to be bitten to death, the twins are not hurt by the insects. The ants help them again later in the action by bringing the flowers requested by the Lords of Xibalba in one of their trials. Such insistence on their role as benefactors leads the anthropologist Raphaël Girard to suggest that these insects' behavior reflects the social evolution that culminates in the agricultural society of the Fourth Age that the twins represent: "We have a clear explanation of the manner in which ants feed themselves and live in society in deference to Hunahpu who gives them a social constitution that mirrors the Mayas' own. These hymenopteran insects which had been Zipacná's helpers . . . are now [the twins'] loyal allies. . . . This makes plain the reaction taking place on the earthly plane as it evolves toward a new order of things" (*Le Popol Vuh*, 167).
- 54 From Mary Preuss's very informative study we learn that Opossum (Jun Ajpú Uch) is one of the members of the creator couple in the *Popol Vuh*. The other member, and this should come as no surprise, is Coyote (Jun Ajpú Utiw [41]).
- 55 The North American name "opossum" (*Didelphys virginiana*) derives from a Virginia Indian dialect in which *apasum* means "the white animal" (Mahr, 63). We shall see in the next section that this color is emblematic of Goyo's *nahual* and of the light of day, which is symbolized by number thirteen in Mesoamerican mythology.
- 56 She explains that "the Indians were to eat this maize instead of rotten wood." As an opossum, she climbs up and throws down quantities of cobs. Then she reassumes human shape and shows her mother-in-law how to make maize cakes (Myth 87, "The origin of cultivated plants," quoted by Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit*, 165).
- 57 As R. M. Gilmore observes, "All canines of tropical America are foxes (to the Indian mythographer) with the exception of the wild dog (*Icticyon venaticus*)" (377-378).
- 58 In keeping with the fusing together of both animals in many versions of this myth, the coyote is freely substituted for the fox. For example, in the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, we read: "Only two animals knew that there was food (maize) in *Paxil*, the place where those animals are found which are called Coyote and Crow. The Coyote animal was killed, and in his remains, when he was quartered, corn was discovered" (46-47).
- 59 In Maya-Quiché lore animals are linked with cultural epochs. According to Raphaël Girard, the coyote represents the ancient Mayan culture; as a symbol, it disappears from the mythographic scene at the beginning of the fourth creation whose pictorial emblem is the opossum, god of dawn (*Le Popol Vuh*, 275-276).
- 60 Gerald Martin argues that *Hombres de maíz* allegorizes the evolution from "la sociedad tribal (tribal society) to "la sociedad de

- clases" (a class society) (clxxxvi). I am not convinced that Asturias's historical allusions are as elaborate and specific as Martin suggests. Asturias is definitely describing an evolution, but his scheme is rather pared down in its sophistication. By this I mean that the novel portrays a forward march from a "primitive" society (which, ironically, turns out to be the historical present or the *sociedad de clases* to which Martin alludes) to a "progressive" one patterned on the basis of ancestral Maya-Quiché traditions.
- 61 The firefly wizard in *Hombres de maíz* tells Nicho, "he was the Curer-Deer of the Seventh Fire . . . a deer with seven ashes on its crown, seven white volcanic eruptions between its little needle horns" (296).
- 62 When the twins enter the Dark House in Xibalbá they are given burning kindling and cigars with the proviso that they both be returned untouched. Hunahpu and Xbalanque place fireflies on the tips of the cigars to deceive the lords of the underworld and, for this reason, this insect is traditionally associated with fire and the fire god (cf. Girard, *Le Popol Vuh*, 163).
- 63 The link between Hunahpu, decapitation, and fertility is alluded to by the firefly wizard when he states: "The first day, in a city of peasants with the roots of medicinal herbs, dawned to shield you against the bat (i.e., in the Bat House of the *Popol Vuh*) so that you, sober and vertebrate within a medulla of melodious canes, with the blond hair of your sex upon your head (i.e., the stamen of the corn plant) would be decapitated in full ripeness" (*Hombres de maíz*, 302).
- 64 The Spanish text reads, "el agua se quema y lo quema todo" (117), which Martin translates as "the water will catch and everything will burn" (100).
- 65 A literal translation would read "the maize-leaf ears of the yellow rabbits which are the ears that wrap the cobs," making the analogy even more explicit.
- 66 The jaguar, as we know, is associated with the deer in Mayan mythology, a nexus that further clarifies the interrelation between the sorcerer-deer of the Seventh Fire and the number seven in Asturias's novel (227-228).
- 67 In Mesoamerican cosmogony each of these colors corresponds to a world direction.
- 68 Even the doctor who wants to marry the luckless Candelaria later in the novel is "a saffron-colored old man" (259).
- 69 In the *Popol Vuh* One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu are instructed by the black road: "I am the one you are taking. I am the lord's road" (111).
- 70 Thompson points out how "dogs in the Maya codices are almost always painted black and white and connected with the underworld" (*Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 143).

- 71 Because the newborn sun representative of the Fourth Age is red when it rises, this color is one of the emblems of Maya-Quiché civilization (Girard, 254).
- 72 "Blanco, blancura, luz, alba del día, alba (comienzo) de una cosa y más especialmente de la civilización sedentaria, bello, bien, bueno, belleza, felicidad, etc.; marca de superlativo" (White, whiteness, light, dawn, beginning of something and more specifically of sedentary civilization, beautiful, fine, good, beauty, happiness, etc., indicative of something superlative). Asturias adds, "Por la multiplicidad de sus sentidos esta palabra es una incomodidad para la traducción" (Given its many meanings, this word is difficult to translate [*Los dioses, los héroes*, 155]).
- 73 Zac means "white" in Maya. Asturias's pun is particularly rich in connotations since *zacate* also means grass in Guatemala. The name of the pharmacist who sells the poison that kills Gaspar is Zacatón, which literally means "big grass." As Richard Callan points out, "In honor of Toci Aztec women were beheaded to signify the plucking of corn ears. This sacrificial rite is conveyed by the eight heads of the Zacatóns which the Tecún brothers brought home and presented to Yaca (the shock did cure her hiccoughs). Corn is one of the big grasses, and that is what the word *zacatón* means, big grass. Asturias hints as much: 'They decapitated the Zacatóns, who were cut down like grass' ('Decapitaron a los Zacatón, que fueron arrancados de la vida como cortar zacate,' 255)" (*Miguel Angel Asturias*, 68).
- 74 Significantly, "the *white* prefix usually appears with the glyph of the young moon goddess" (my emphasis; Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 252); in *Hombres de maíz*, María Tecún is likened to María the Rain, who is portrayed as the moon in the last chapter of the novel: "she who took flight like cascading water and was paralyzed there where she is, between the sky, the earth and the void!" (327).
- 75 As I have repeatedly indicated, Arévalo's social reforms and notably his distribution of land to the peasants are dramatized by Goyo's return to Pisigüilito. However, in 1954, after Arbenz (who succeeds Arévalo in 1951 and implements the agrarian reform law) is forced to resign, the next man in power, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, abolishes the land reform of his predecessors and confiscates the properties that had been allocated to the peasants. His advent to power signals the demise of the short-lived republic of the men of maize that Asturias had optimistically announced in the epilogue of his first *neo-Indigenista* novel. For a more detailed discussion of the sociopolitical events that take place in Guatemala between 1945 and 1954, see Thomas and Marjorie Melville's illuminating *Guatemala: The Politics of Land Ownership* (New York: Free Press 1971).

3 *Mulata de tal*

- 1 *Mulata de tal*, 1st ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1963), translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa (New York: Delacorte Press, 1967). All quotations are taken from the English edition unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 Asturias's disappointment is plain in his conversations with Luis López Alvarez. He tells the Spanish critic and poet, "Para pintar la situación de lo que yo llamo 'dos veces bastardo,' es decir, la clase social bastarda, sin sentimiento nacional y que prefiere pactar con el imperialismo . . . lo primero que yo hago . . . es presentar al estudiantado. Hubo un estudiantado en Guatemala que llevó a casi todas las reformas al país. . . Esta generación, que alcanza un poco la época de Arbenz, que es revolucionaria, que lucha contra Estrada Cabrera y le derroca, esta generación, cuando llega el momento de otras reformas, se vuelve temerosa y se echa para atrás. Paralelamente, hay los que al servicio de intereses plutocráticos – abogados, médicos, profesionales – en lugar de defender al país, se prestan a hacerse cómplices de la entrega de Guatemala por las fuerzas reaccionarias" (In order to sketch the situation of what I refer to as "two times bastard," that is to say, the bastard social class with no nationalistic feelings that prefers to sign treaties with imperialistic powers . . . the first thing I do . . . is portray the student body. There once was a student body in Guatemala that brought about almost every single reform in the country. . . This generation, which extends almost to the time of Arbenz, is revolutionary, fights against and defeats Estrada Cabrera, but, when the time comes to bring about other reforms, becomes frightened and digs its heels. So, too, there are those who choose to serve plutocratic interests – lawyers, doctors, professionals – and, instead of defending the country, act as accomplices in the despoilment of Guatemala by reactionary forces [192-195]). Asturias is specifically referring to the action of his novels *Viernes de Dolores* (1972) and *Dos veces bastardo* (1974), but the anger vis-à-vis the social classes who disappointed him during Arbenz's regime and in the years that followed is just as evident in *Mulata de tal*.
- 3 I will use *Mulata*, the title of the novel's English translation, from this point on.
- 4 Asturias describes Arévalo's presidency as "the time of revolutionary laws, as they were called, although there was nothing revolutionary about them, because in England, for instance, these same laws date back to about 1880. They were social security laws, labor laws, there was the beginning of a land distribution, under the agrarian reform law" (Harss, 93).
- 5 Azurdia and Morales Urrutia (70, 102). In a fairly recent study John P. Powelson observes that in Guatemala, "the Agrarian Law provided for the liquidation of feudal properties, prohibition of all

forms of servitude and distribution of land to the landless," and concludes that these provisions were "no more radical than would be acceptable today under the Alliance for Progress." See *Latin America: Today's Economic and Social Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 55.

- 6 Dulles was a senior partner of Cromwell-Sullivan, lawyers for the United Fruit Company, a fact that adds yet another dimension to his participation in the political events that take place in Guatemala in 1954. It also bears keeping in mind that in 1936 he was personally instrumental in drawing up the contract between the United Fruit Company and Jorge Ubico (Melville and Melville, 77).
- 7 The eight-member delegation from Guatemala headed by Guillermo Toriello included Miguel Angel Asturias among its delegates.
- 8 Naturally, the name of the protagonist is far from gratuitous. Celestino (which can be loosely translated as "heavenly one") joins forces with the Devil in Asturias's scheme.
- 9 The exchange of Catalina for gold is made more poignant because in this novel the language of feelings is repeatedly subverted by the language of currency. Celestino refers to his wife as "his greatest treasure," for instance (50).
- 10 Asturias very probably knew that in Quiché the suffix *-tah* can be read as "goods, riches, gifts," and this no doubt determined his choice of name for the character who emblemizes the greed for gold in the novel and is offered as a "gift" to Celestino (Tedlock, 370).
- 11 The philosopher in Vasconcelos's *Prometeo Vencedor* tells Satan: "The goal of work is to earn us free time, the productive kind of free time that allows one to think and enjoy. A treasure that up until today has been the privilege of a very few who don't know how to make use of it!" He adds, "The rich have been unable to use it because wealth is a kind of leprosy for those who have it and a despoilment for those who put up with it. Instead, used for the common good, wealth will be a boon, while hoarded by a single man it is a crime! This is why the law should be, may no one have too much while some live in misery" (44).
- 12 This is why, to quote Vasconcelos, "Man is on his way out, on his way out with everything that belongs to him, with all the seeds of his being!"
- 13 As was pointed out earlier, this loss of self is typical of surrealist poetry. In all evidence, Asturias kept turning back to his sources of inspiration throughout his life; his philosophical and narrative system came together in the 1920s and stayed with him until his death. But, as if this "system" were a shelf of ingredients, the author always varies the proportions used in each of his novels. For instance, *Mulata* is less influenced by Mayan mythology than

- Hombres de maíz* but it exhibits more elements of surrealist rhetoric than the earlier novel.
- 14 Gregory Rabassa translates "vendí mi carne al sol de la riqueza" as "I sold my flesh to riches of the sun" (215).
 - 15 The character of Saturnino in Vasconcelos's play likewise declares: "But if procreation used to be a good thing in days of old, now that earthly existence has been squeezed dry of all its juices, it makes sense that the almighty should climb and not crawl. . . . This is why both instincts struggle within us: the instinct that creates life and the instinct that abstains because it is holding back for bigger and better things" (*Prometeo Vencedor*, 61).
 - 16 The Spanish original reads "hasta hacer aguas de la risa," which Rabassa translates as "I cry from laughing."
 - 17 Transformations following a fall from grace (which is typically the punishment for wanting too much, or for "jumping higher and higher") are a major motif in *Mulata* and allude to man's own dissatisfaction as emblemized by Yumí.
 - 18 In the Spanish original Yumí is given the title of "Jayumijaja" after his initiation into the boar clan.
 - 19 As Susan Willis points out, the "sauvages" lost laughing ability is Asturias's way of mocking Pope Paul III, who in the notorious debate about whether or not the Indians could be pressed into tributary labor in exchange for salvation, declared that the Indians were undoubtedly human because they could laugh (151).
 - 20 Regarding this insistent association between the Mulata and the color yellow, remember what we have already learned in Chapter 2 (in the section entitled "Colors"): In the Mayan area, yellow is traditionally associated with the southerly direction, which is perceived to be "a region of death and misfortune" (Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 216).
 - 21 The ban on procreation and the emphasis on eroticism that are ubiquitous in Asturias's novel mirror Saturnino's beliefs in *Prometeo Vencedor*: "Voluptuousness should be condemned because it spoils character, but fleeting pleasure is innocent as long as it bears no fruit" (57).
 - 22 Likewise, in *Prometeo Vencedor*: "Blind appetite is like an anesthetic for the conscience but when it grinds to a halt, the conscience discovers an instinct within itself that makes it first hesitate and, then, refuse to procreate. This is the moment when the Almighty power, disenchanted with finitude begins to turn toward infinite existence!" (57). Unlike Asturias, Vasconcelos's idea was to strive toward the creation of purely spiritual beings "struggling to avoid falling back toward a human nature" (57). Saturnino concludes that all people have offered tribute to prodigal courtesans and virgin nuns alike because both "relinquish the sad adventure of humanity's journey into the world" (57-58) (i.e., they do not procreate).

- 23 While portraying this triple possession Asturias is obviously recalling and making use of the surrealists' notion of "l'un dans l'autre."
- 24 It is important to note that Asturias's preoccupation with decay finds a precedent in Maya-Quiché tradition where names having to do with the abject are plentiful. For instance, in the *Popol Vuh*, the fifth- and sixth-ranking Lords of Xibalbá are named Pus Master and Jaundice Master (*Ahal puh, ahal zana* [Tedlock, 356]).
- 25 In the more readily available Avon paperback translation of the novel some of these references appear on pages 74, 81, 120, 125, 126, 129, 130, 143, 151, 152, 164, 181, 191, 192, 194, 202, 214, 216, 223, 226, 233, 237, 238, 240.
- 26 I am specifically referring to *Life against death; the psychoanalytical meaning of history* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1959).
- 27 Doña Blanca Asturias has kindly allowed me to examine Asturias's personal library in their Paris apartment; I have had in hand the author's personal and annotated copies of Lévi-Strauss (*Le Cru et le cuit*), Bataille, and Freud.
- 28 Condemnations of this type were not new in his writings. In an article published in *El Imparcial* on October 4, 1927, the author firmly states, "La importancia que en Guatemala se da al dinero y a la fuerza bruta, nos hace considerar en ulterior examen, como indicio de mejoramiento personal o colectivo, el aumento del peculio o de las posibilidades de mando. Esta manera de apreciar, unida al natural humano de propender al perfeccionamiento, ha despertado en la generalidad de los guatemaltecos, mis paisanos, el deseo de ser ricos o poderosos – de ser mejores –, y como la riqueza y el poder son difíciles de alcanzar por medios honestos en un país empobrecido y debilitado como Guatemala . . . en su conquista nos hemos valido de los medios deshonestos más cínicos y torpes" (The importance attributed to money and to brute force in Guatemala makes us perceive an increase in fortune or the ability to command as emblematic of personal or collective improvement. This sort of perception along with the natural human striving toward perfection has awakened among most of the people from Guatemala, my compatriots, the desire to be rich or powerful – to be better – and since wealth and power are difficult to obtain through honest means in an impoverished and weakened country like Guatemala, to get what we want we have used the most cynically and blunderingly dishonest expedients [*Periodismo*, 214]).
- 29 Chiltic means "to go on stilts" in Quiché (Basseta, "Vocabulario en lengua quiché," 1698). Faithful to his role model, Asturias's character also walks on stilts. Furthermore, "walking on stilts" is the name of a dance done by Hunahpu and Xbalanque in their guise as vagabonds, which is exactly what Celestino and Catalina become after leaving Quiavicús (Tedlock, 367).

- 30 In the words of Saturnino, "Energy strives to become eternal and no longer wishes to fall back into the ephemeral implicit in the act of engendering" (*Prometeo Vencedor*, 60).
- 31 Like Cashtoc, Vasconcelos's Saturnino "censured marriage and procreation as goals contrary to the superior destiny of the soul" (*Prometeo*, 52). *Vencedor*, 52). Vasconcelos's idea was that human beings should forget their "preocupaciones terrestres" (earthly concerns) and give themselves fully to the investigation of what he labels "el porvenir transcendental" ("the transcendental future") (56).
- 32 Vasconcelos's influence is evident once again in this instance. In *Prometeo Vencedor* the character of Saturnino declares, "My intuition, born in the deepest and noblest part of my instinct, tells me that life must free itself from its submission to the planet; it tells me that life does not transfigure itself beyond human nature" (52).
- 33 Since the publication of the *Edición crítica de las obras completas* (Paris and Mexico: Klincksieck and Fondo de Cultura Económica), this tendency is being reversed. Dorita Nouhaud and Gerald Martin have gone to great lengths to show the wealth of symbolism in Asturias's fiction.
- 34 It is very curious that Asturias never wrote anything about Artaud because, as Marc Cheymol points out, he must have been familiar with his theories and his theater ("*Années folles*," 179).
- 35 Exactly like Asturias, Artaud argues that "the Revolution most urgently needed consists of a kind of regression into time. Let us return to the mentality or even simply to the way of life of the Middle Ages" he suggests in *Manifiesto for a Theater That Failed* (162). Also like Asturias, he felt that "the foundations of most of the habits of modern thinking, European or otherwise, should be blown up" (162). In *The Theater and Its Double*, he is even more explicit, "Well, I say that the present state of society is unjust and should be destroyed" (235). *Mulata* is the portrayal in fiction of such destruction.

Conclusion

- 1 In 1971, Asturias declares to Luis Harss, "In *Hombres de maíz* the Spanish we speak approaches the outer edges beyond which it becomes something else. There are moments in which the language is not merely a language but develops what we might refer to as a biological dimension" (103). After listening to the author wax lyrical on the subjects of literature and communication, Harss concludes that "for Asturias language lives a borrowed life. Words are echoes or shadows of living beings" (*ibid.*).
- 2 In "Ideales que han faltado a Guatemala," Asturias discusses the vagaries of the university system (*Periodismo*, 222); the subject of

"El uso de razón," is child-rearing (392), that of "Ojo nuevo," the church (309), and that of "Guatemala es un desierto," national agriculture (385).

- 3 In this same article he goes on to say: "I would have to go on at great length were I to enumerate all the attributes of the Indian soul, the Indian whose cities might have disappeared in cataclysms unrecorded in the history of men but not so the legacy which was passed on to us in their blood" (*Periodismo*, 174).
- 4 Arguing in favor of bringing new blood into the country, Asturias urges, "Let the same be done with the Indian as with other animal species when they show symptoms of degeneration." To this remarkably racist statement he adds, "When cattle were first imported to Santo Domingo . . . they degenerated enormously" (103).
- 5 Further assessments of the Indian include: "Sentimiento moral: utilitarista; mentalidad relativamente escasa y voluntad nula. . . . Es cruel en sus relaciones familiares; silencioso, calculador, no se deja arrebatar por la pasión ni el entusiasmo; rie con una mueca terrible, es huraño y ve con los ojos helados de malicia. . . . Tiene la comprensión muy lenta y es terco. . . . También es notable su facilidad para imitar (cualidad de las razas inferiores). . . . pero es incapaz de crear" (Moral tendency: utilitarian; mental ability, relatively scarce, and a total lack of will power. . . . He is cruel in his dealings with his family; noiseless, calculating, he doesn't allow passion or enthusiasm to win over him; he makes a terrible grimace when he laughs, is surly and watches with eyes frozen with malice. . . . He is slow to understand and stubborn. . . . His ability to copy (a knack of inferior races) is also noteworthy . . . but he is incapable of creating anything on his own. [*El problema social del indio*, 57]). Asturias's profound disdain for the Indian at this stage is perhaps most evident in the following declaration, also from *El problema social*: "Todo vocablo es reducido," he writes, "para dar sincera expresión de su existencia de bestias relajadas por el aguardiente, la chicha y el ardor del trópico" (No words do justice in an attempt to offer a clear view of their existence as lax beasts slackened by alcohol, *chicha*, and the heat of the tropics [62]).
- 6 Gerald Martin and Marc Cheymol are among the first to see this thesis for what it is. The French critic describes Asturias's sources for *El problema social del indio* as "bookish" and "inadequate." And he adds, "No matter how praiseworthy . . . [the dissertation might be], it is not the product of direct research about indigenous reality. The knowledge the young Asturias could have had about the Indians seems to be rather minimal" (*Periodismo*, 851).
- 7 He admits as much when he writes on January 25, 1927, "Guatemalan nationals who arrive in Europe with their heads filled with Guatemala, pure sentimentalism, become convinced, not all too soon, that our country has yet to be made" ("Hacia una patria mejor," *Periodismo*, 156).

- 8 We do not have the date of composition for "Luis Garrafita," the story that will eventually become the "Gaspar Ilóm" chapter of *Hombres de maíz*. The manuscript has been preserved by Georges Pillement, who dates it anywhere between 1925 and 1930. "En la tiniebla del Cañaveral," the tale that informs the seventh chapter of *Hombres de maíz*, was originally published in *Imán*, I, Paris, 1931 and in *El Imparcial* on August 15, 1931, p. 5. Both stories are included in the appendixes to the *Edición crítica de las obras completas*, IV.
- 9 He had declared as early as August 24, 1929, "The inversion of values in our Guatemala is something disconcerting [. . .] gold in the form of money has corrupted our feelings" ("Ojo nuevo," *Periodismo*, 374).
- 10 Asturias declares to Luis López Alvarez in what is possibly the best long interview he ever gave, "To paint the situation of what I refer to as 'twice bastards,' that is to say the abastardized social class deprived of any sort of patriotic feelings who prefers dealing with Imperialism (and I am not referring to the upper classes but to the middle echelons), for this, the first thing I do in my novel *Viernes de Dolores* is to portray the students."
- 11 The theme of the doppelgänger is prevalent in all world literature; from Poe's "William Wilson" to Italo Calvino's *Il generale dimezzato* the schizoid personality appears as a widespread literary topos echoing man's intrinsic duality. But Latin America, with its heterogeneous culture and its multilingual heritage, gives further scope to the literary portrayal of a split personality. And how could it be otherwise in a land where cultures and languages struggle for supremacy and antagonistic forces systematically reject, deny, and suppress each other.
- 12 Galaos is by no means the only critic who claims *Hombres de maíz* has no internal coherence. A. Dessau maintains that the novel is composed of "six legendary stories" and "lacks a well-integrated narrative structure" ("Guatemala en las novelas de Miguel Angel Asturias," 305).
- 13 Asturias always maintained that in his *neo-Indigenista* fiction (which he personally preferred to his other writings) no holds were barred, whereas in the sociopolitical novels he wrote what he felt had to be written. Duty has seldom played inspiring beldam to literature and for this reason (he is the first to admit it), many of his more blatant homilies, *Week-end in Guatemala*, for example, "stand up poorly as fiction" (Harss, 97).
- 14 There is at least one exception to this. In my own study of this author's work I have discovered that by the time he writes *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (1971), this author had integrated at least one device typical of pre-Columbian literature into his novel. I refer interested readers to my article, "El papel de la fauna y de los símbolos precolombinos en la obra de Miguel Angel Asturias y

de José María Arguedas," *Discurso Literario*, IV, 2 (Spring 1987), 401-415.

- 15 As the stubborn devil in *Mulata* maintains, the magic that counts in this world is only the one that "expels the smoke and converts it into love, into friendship, into the bond of union between beings"; this, he hopes, will become "the bond of true peace among men" (240).

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All quotations from *Hombres de maíz* come from Gerald Martin's translation, *Men of Maize* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1975). The quotations from *Mulata de tal* are from Gregory Rabassa's English translation entitled *Mulata* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1967). All other translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

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Index

- Abuela de los Remiendos, 80
 actualization, 132
 Adams, Robert, 207
Affable Savages (Francis Huxley), 142
Agua (José María Arguedas), 65
 Ah Ceh, 146
 Ah Kin: compared to Nicho Aquino, 155, 157; role of, 126
 "Ahora que me acuerdo" (Now that I remember), 51-4
Alclasán, 88
 alcohol, 88, 196-7
 Alegría, Ciro: on Indians, 41; *El mundo es ancho y ajeno*, 38, 65
 Alegría, Fernando, 6-7, 106, 267n24
Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (A.P.R.A.), 38
 alienation, 140
 "Amada Tropical," 122
 Amado, Clemencia: influence of, on Asturias, 240; marriage of Asturias with, 88, 122, 197; perceptions of, 23; separation from, 11
 anal sadistic complex, 212-13
 anal symbolic complex, 195, 197, 199, 203-5, 207
Andalusian Dog, An, 47
 Anderson Imbert, Enrique, on *Hombres de maíz*, 264n9
Andes Viewed from the City: Literary and Political Discourse of the Indian in Peru (1848-1930), *The* (Efraín Kristal), 13
 "Andrés Eloy Blanco, alto poeta de hoy," 269n32
 Angel Face, 109
 "Angustia": depiction of women in, 268n28; unattainability of women in, 268n29
 animals: Asturias's use of, 68-9; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 141-50, 158-60; in *Mulata*, 179
Annals of the Cakchiquels: animals in, 273n58; coyotes in, 144
Annals of the Xahil, 12, 31-2
Anoche, 10 de marzo de 1543, 88
 Ansueto, Alfonso, 166
 anthropology, 196
 ants: and discovery of corn, 105, 132-3, 143-4; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 141, 144-5; in *Popol Vuh*, 272-3n53; role of, in *Mulata de tal*, 234
 Apollonian, 230-1
 A.P.R.A. party, 38
 Aquino, Nicho: and Aleja Cuevas, 112-13; as Attis, 228; as coyote, 143; and curer-deer, 120; depiction of, 42, 69, 78, 147; evolution of, 114; and Hilario Sacayón, 131 importance of, 123-7, 140, 154, 155; linked with black, 155-6; linked with four and nine, 152-4; linked with Goyo Yic, 267n20; linked with red, 157; linked with yellow, 155; as protagonist, 99; role of, 105-6; runaway wife of, 95
 Aragón, Luis, 33-4, 246
 Arbenz, Jacobo: downfall of, 6, 163-5; influence of, on Asturias, 10-11, 196-7, 212; reforms of, 90, 100, 162-3, 173, 226-7, 272n50, 275n75; rule of, 65-6; student activity under, 276n2; in *Week-end in Guatemala*, 166
 Aréstegui, Narciso: and *Indigenista* literature, 258n15; *El padre Horán*, 42
 Arévalo, Juan José, 85; Asturias on, 276n4; goal of, 127-8; influence of, on Asturias, 10-11; reforms of, 100, 120, 133, 137, 154, 158, 162, 272n50, 275n75; rule of, 65-6, 89-90
 Argentina, 196-7
 Arguedas, Alcides: 138; compared to Asturias, 76; *Raza de bronce*, 38
 Arguedas, José María: *Agua*, 65; in contrast to Asturias, 241; on Indians, 41; and *neo-Indigenismo*, 14-15, 38, 251-2
Arquitectura de la vida nueva, *La*, 90, 128, 239, 271n47
 Artaud, Antonin: Asturias's awareness of, 280n34; on human advancement, 280n35; influence of, on Asturias, 234, 237; writing of, 269n35

- Asociación General de Estudiantes Universitarios, 19
- Asturias, Blanca, *see* Mora y Araujo, Blanca
- Asturias, Ernesto, 17–19
- Asturias, Miguel Angel (son), 197
- Asturias, Rodrigo, 197
- Ateneo de la Juventud, 20
- Atitlán, 62–3
- Attis, 228
- Audiencia de los confines, La* 165
- Austin, J. L., 272n50
- avant-garde, 9–10
- Aves sin nido*, 13
- Aztecs, 229–30
- Bacabs, 152
- Baja Verapaz, 18
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, 213, 222–3, 225–6
- Banana trilogy: compared to *El señor presidente*, 3; style of, 216; and United Fruit Company, 166
- barrenness, *see* sterility
- Barthes, Roland, 135, 240
- Bataille, Georges, 35; Asturias's familiarity with, 172; and eroticism, 223; *L'Erotisme*, 161; on expenditure, 173–4; influence of, on Asturias, 200, 209
- beheading, *see* decapitation
- Belehep Tzi, 271–2n48
- Bellini, Giuseppe: on Asturias in Europe, 256–7n7; on *Hombres de maíz*, 92, 103; interview by, 22; on the *Leyendas*, 45
- Bettelheim, Bruno, 50
- Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Sigmund Freud), 211–12
- black: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 155–6; importance of, in *Mulata de tal*, 204, 206; in *Popol Vuh*, 274n69; *see also* colors
- blindness, 143, 154, 158
- Bosch, Hieronymus, 205–6
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 5
- breeding: and Candanga, 191–2; and death, 97; José Vasconcelos on, 278n22; linked with carnival, 215; in *Mulata de tal*, 210, 223–6; Saturnino on, 278n15, n21, n22
- Breton, André: Asturias meets, 33; and conductive threads, 56; influence of, on Asturias, 233, 249; and opposites, 48; and surrealism, 34–5, 43, 82–4; use of linking by, 81; use of polarity by, 52; writing of, 259–60n24
- bricolage, 240
- Brotherston, Gordon, 7
- Brown, Norman O.: on anal symbolic complex, 199; *Life Against Death*, 238; and oedipal aspect of Devil, 205; and victory of death over life, 253
- “Brujos de la tormenta primaveral, Los”: analysis of, 70–8; Mayan mythology in, 249, 262–3n39; as *neo-Indigenismo*, 251; publication of, 67
- Cabrakan, 54–5
- Caillouis, Roger, 172
- Callado Dolor de los Tzotziles, El* (Ramón Rubín), 272n52
- Callan, Richard: on Asturias's writing, 228, 230; on *Hombres de maíz*, 114–15; *Miguel Angel Asturias*, 5; on Miguelita de Acatán, 134; on Zacatóns' decapitation, 265–6n11, 275n73
- Camé, 93
- Camila Canales, 109
- Camus, Albert, 247
- Candanga: and breeding, 191–2; and Celestino Yumí, 188; on destruction of man, 234; and Dionysus, 229; and duality, 220; and gold, 177; importance of, 189–90; inspiration for, 167; role of, 170–1, 201, 210, 214; and sterility, 178
- Capitan, Joseph-Louis, 30, 32, 49, 145, 249
- Cara de Angel, 87
- Cardoza y Aragón, Luis: Asturias and, 6, 33; on surrealism, 246; on violent imagery, 52
- carnival: and destruction, 224; features of, 217; and historical timelessness, 227; inverted logic of, 232; linked with sideshow, reproduction, and laughter, 215, 218; in *Mulata de tal*, 205, 213–15, 224, 227; and proliferation, 225–6
- Carpentier, Alejo: Asturias meets, 33; *Kingdom of This World*, 130; and magic realism, 134; on surrealism, 36; writing of, 166
- Cashtoc: battling Candanga and Celestino Yumí, 188; and Dionysus, 229; and duality, 220; and eroticizing death, 211; and excrement, 206; importance of, 189–90; inspiration for, 167; and laughter, 215; linked with death, 191, 224; role of, 171, 192–3, 214
- Cassou, Jean, 5
- Castellanos, Rosario: and caves, 271n44; and *Ciclo de Chiapas*, 257n13; depiction of Indians by, 12, 40; and *neo-Indigenismo*, 14–15; and *neo-Indigenista* literature, 251–2
- Castelpoggi, Atilio Jorge, 257n11

- Castillo Armas, Carlos: effect of, on Asturias, 224, 227; regime of, 164-6, 173; rule of, 275n75
- castration, in *Hombres*, 110-11, 187; anxiety, 115, 204
- Castro, Carlo Antonio, 257n13
- Catholicism, 55
- Caws, Mary Ann: on Breton's writing, 48; on polarity, 52; on surrealism, 65, 83, 246, 257n10; on violent imagery, 52
- Celestino, meaning of, 277n8
- Chacs, 148, 156
- Chamber-Potters, 206
- Chan, 148
- character, Asturias's, 22-7
- character substitution: in "Los brujos de la tormenta primaveral," 76-8; in *Hombres de maíz*, 99-100
- Cherokee (Indians), 142
- Cheymol, Marc: on Asturias's character, 22-4, 244; on Asturias's connection with *Prensa Latina*, 256-7n7; on Asturias's education in Paris, 32; on Asturias's loyalty to Guatemala, 263n3; on Asturias's use of words, 50-1; on *Leyendas*, 44-5; 66-7; *Miguel Angel Asturias dans le Paris des "années folles,"* 7-8, 22; on *El problema social del indio*, 281n6
- Chilam Balam of Chumayel*: rabbits in, 149; seven in, 151
- Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, 149
- Chiltic: Celestino Yumí as, 209, 219-20; defined, 279n29
- Chimalpín, Father: battling Candanga, 188; and duality, 220; importance of, 191; and Lent depiction, 225-6; and necrophilia, 193; role of, 170-1, 192-3, 210, 214; transformations of, 189
- Chinchibirín, 78-81, 84
- Chorro de Horizontes, 72-3, 77
- Ciclo de Chiapas*, 40, 257n13
- Clarivigilia primaveral*: importance of, 8; intertextuality in, 3; misunderstanding of, 1
- Cobra* (Severo Sarduy), 4
- colors: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 154-60; see also black; red; white; yellow
- communalism, 172-3, 177, 183, 191, 208, 223-4, 234, 236, 252-3
- comparison, 61-2
- Comte, Auguste, 21, 242-3
- Con el rehén en los dientes*, 88
- conjunctions, coordinating, 61-2
- "Contacto," 268n29
- Conversaciones con Miguel Angel Asturias* (Luis López Alvarez), 255n3
- coprophilia, 195
- corn: animals associated with, 143-5; discovery of, 267n21; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 9, 93, 103, 107, 141-5, 248; importance of, in Mayan mythology, 73-4, 82, 103, 106, 141, 142, 248-9
- Cornejo Polar, Antonio, 13
- "Correo-Coyote," 91
- Couffon, Claude, 264n6
- coyote: in ancient Mayan culture, 273n59; fused with fox, 143, 273n58; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 143-5; Nicho Aquino as, 143; as part of Vuh creation couple, 273n54; in *Popol Vuh*, 144
- Creek (Indians), 142
- Cristalino Brazo de la Cerbatana, 72, 77
- Croce, Benedetto, 136
- cruelty, 112-14
- Cru et le cuit*, *Le* (Claude Lévi-Strauss), 141
- Cuco de los Sueños, 45, 50-1
- Cuculcán, 79-81, 262n35
- "Cuculcán": analysis of, 78-84; as *neo-Indigenismo*, 262-3n39; publication of, 66-7
- "Cuero de Oro," 43-4
- Cuevas, Aleja, 112-13
- Culebro, Chigüichón: and Goyo Yic, 104, 143; and Nicho Aquino, 124
- cultural identity, 240
- culture, Mayan: Asturias's awareness of, 30-3, 37, 67-70, 243-4; Asturias's opinion of, 244-5; historic epochs of, 9, 42, 75; influence of, on *Mulata de tal*, 229-30; see also Indians
- Dada, 43
- Dawn-Grown: and grotesque exaggeration, 222; and regeneration, 224-5
- de Alencar, José, 41
- de Alvarado, Pedro: 173, 245; and María Tecún, 271-2n48; role of, 62-3
- de Andrea, Pedro, 255
- death: in "Amada Tropical," 122; depiction of, 190-1; dominion of, 180; eroticizing of, 211-12; and love, 192; in *Mulata de tal*, 202, 223-6; mythic context of, 100; as regenerative element, 97, 100-101, 213
- death drive, 208
- death instinct, 200
- de Beer, Gabriella, 13
- de Betancourt, Pedro, 47
- decapitation: in *Hombres de maíz*, 95, 266n15; and Hunahpu, 102, 213,

- 266n15, 274n63; in Mayan mythology, 275n73; of Zacatón family, 265–6n11, 275n73
- de Ciudad Real, Antonio, 262n31
- deer: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 144–6, 158, 160, 274n61; linked with jaguar, 274n66; linked with seven, 151
- de la Degollación, Jerónimo: identity of, 222; and masochism, 187–8; and Mulata, 191; and necrophilia, 194; role of, 192–3; and sodomy, 195
- del Paso, Fernando, 2
- dépense, *see* expenditure
- de San Francisco, Elvira: depiction of, 57–9; role of, 60
- desire, 122, 123
- Desnos, Robert, 33–4
- despair, 177
- Dessau, A., 282n12
- destruction, 234–5
- Devil: and death, 212, 223–4; on greed, 176–7; linked with excrement, 204–8, 232; and madness, 229; and money, 200; in *Mulata de tal*, 161, 169–75, 178, 180, 182–3, 188–9, 192, 196, 199, 201, 214, 218–21, 237, 248; oedipal aspect of, 205
- Diario del Aire*: editorial policy of, 88; start of, 86–7
- Díaz, Enrique, 164
- Díaz Puiljá, Catalina, 14, 252
- Dionysus: and Cashtoc and Candanga, 229; and madness, 232, 236; Mulata as, 230–1; and relevance to *Mulata de tal*, 228–30
- Dioses, los héroes y los hombres de Guatemala antigua*, *Los*, 68
- dog: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 144–5, 146–7; in Mayan mythology, 274n70
- Doña Bárbara, 247
- Doña Tina, 43–4
- Don Chepe, 43–4
- Don Diego, 38
- Don Rodrigo, 47
- doppelgänger, 282n11
- Dorfman, Ariel: on *Hombres de maíz*, 131–2; *Imaginación y violencia en América*, 5
- Dorward, Frances, 13
- Dos veces bastardo*: selfishness in, 246–7; social commentary in, 276n2
- dry corn leaves, 199–200
- duality: in “Guatemala,” 48; in *Hombres de maíz*, 146; in Latin American literature, 247–8, 282n11; in *Mulata de tal*, 219–21
- Dulles, John Foster: and Arbenz’s government, 164; and United Fruit Company, 277n6
- Earthquake-Cabrakan, 101, 266n17
- economics, 196
- Edición crítica de las obras completas*, 7
- education: of Asturias, 18–19; Asturias’s belief in, 259n17
- egoic experience, 235–6
- eight: in Mayan hieroglyphic writing, 265–6n11
- Eliade, Mircea, 228
- Elizondo, Salvador: *Farabeuf*, 4
- Ellmann, Richard, 5
- Eluard, Paul: imagery of, 83–4; influence of, on Asturias, 249; and “Leyenda del Cadejo,” 58; and surrealism, 34–5, 53
- emancipation, 59–60, 64–6
- Emulo Lipolidón*, 88
- “En la tiniebla del Cañaverl”: as first published, 282n8; Indian vision in, 245; writing of, 91
- Enriquez de Rivera, Fray Payo, 47
- Entre la piedra y la cruz* (Mario Monteforte Toledo), 272n52
- Eros, 190–1, 210, 212
- eroticism: in Asturias’s writing, 35, 185; in Bataille’s writing, 223; and death, 194, 211–12; and filth, 195; and Mulata, 182
- Erotisme, L’* (Georges Bataille), 161
- Escajadillo, Tomás, 42
- “Es el Caso de Hablar,” 116
- Estrada Cabrera, Manuel: as depicted in *El señor presidente*, 166; influence of, on Asturias, 17–19; students against, 276n2
- Estudiante, El*, 19, 245–6
- “Estudio General” (Gerald Martin), 115–16
- eternal feminine, 114–15
- “Ethics of Competition, The” (F. H. Knight), 161
- exaggeration, grotesque, 219, 222–3
- excrement: importance of, in *Mulata de tal*, 198–200, 240, 248; linked with carnival, 216, 218; linked with Devil, 205–8, 232; linked with sexuality, 201–2; references to, in *Mulata de tal*, 198
- Exito*, 86
- expenditure (*dépense*), 173–5, 209; and eroticism, 185; and laughter, 178; and sterility, 180
- Eyes of the Buried, The*, 166
- fair, *see* carnival

- Falicoff, Simeón, 11, 196-7
 family: Asturias's, 17-18, 23-6;
 Asturias's depictions of, 25
Farabeuf (Salvador Elizondo), 4
 Fargue, León Paul, 263n4
 Feder, Lillian, 228-9, 233
 Fernández, Macedonio, 2
 fertility: in *Hombres*, 106, 142-3; lack of,
 in *Mulata*, 198; linked with Hunahpu,
 274n63; in "Now That I Remember,"
 52; *see also* breeding; sterility
 festival, *see* carnival
 fire: animals associated with, 144-5,
 274n62; importance of, in *Hombres de*
 maíz, 78, 94-8, 102, 107, 144-7,
 156-7, 248; importance of, in Mayan
 mythology, 248-9; in *Popol Vuh*, 101,
 266n17, 267n18
 firefly: importance of, in *Hombres de*
 maíz, 94, 144-5, 146, 274n61; in
 Mayan mythology, 274n62
 fish: Hunahpu as, 266n16; importance
 of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 144-5, 148-9,
 266n12, 267n25
 Flaubert, Gustave, 25, 256n4
 Fortuny, José Manuel, 163
 four: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*,
 151-4; *see also* numbers
 fox: and discovery of corn, 143; fused
 with coyote, 273n58; *see also* animals
 fragmentation: of Golden Skin, 53-4; in
 Mulata de tal, 208-9
 France, 9-10
 Freud, Sigmund: and anal organization,
 195, 199; and androgynous ideal,
 190; influence of, on Asturias, 203-
 4, 208, 211-12; influence of, on
 Mulata de tal, 197; on sacrifice, 103;
 on sadism, 185, 186-7
 Friedel, David, 260-1n29
 Fuentes, Carlos, 41
 Galaos, José Antonio, 4, 248, 250,
 264-5n9
 García Márquez, Gabriel: Asturias's rift
 with, 6; and magic realism, 134; *One*
 Hundred Years of Solitude, 221; and
 women, 122; writing of, 45, 57, 112
 "Gaspar Ilóm," 91; *see also* Ilóm, Gaspar
Gift, The (Marcel Mauss), 161
 gift giving, 172
 Gigantics, 220
 Gilmore, R. M., 147; on dogs, 273n57
 Girard, Raphaël: on ants, 272-3n53; on
 colors, 157; on coyotes, 144, 273n59;
 on fish, 148; on moon and water,
 266n14; on numbers, 151; on
 yellow, 262n37
 Giroma: Catalina Zabala as, 176, 188,
 219, 220; fragmentation of, 209; and
 love, 192; role of, 170
 Godoy, Gonzalo, 151, 155
 gold: Asturias's condemnation of, 279n28,
 282n9; importance of, in *Mulata de*
 tal, 195-6, 198-200, 204, 248
 Golden Skin: fragmentation of, 53-4;
 purpose of, 43-4, 51
 González de Mendoza, José María,
 31-2, 68-9
 González Echevarría, Roberto, 15, 39
 Goyo-Opossum, *see* Yic, Goyo
 "Gozo de sílabas felices," 268n29
 Grande, Pijosa: and relationship
 with Gaspar Ilóm, 109-10; as run-
 away, 112
 Granny Patch, 80
 Granny Soot, 194-5, 206
 greed, 175-7, 198-9
Green Pope, The, 166
 Greimas, A. J., 8-9, 44
 grotesque exaggeration, 219, 222-3
 Guacamayo, 78-81, 84
 Guatemala: Asturias flees, 27-8; As-
 turias in, 17-19; Asturias's depiction
 of, 259n18; Asturias's opinion of,
 276n2, 282n10; Asturias's program
 for, 241-2, 252-4, 258-9n16, 259-
 60n26, 263-4n5, 271n47, 272n49;
 Asturias's return to, 85-6, 263n2, n3;
 influence of, on Asturias, 161-2,
 166, 168-9, 244-5; inhabitants of,
 31; social reform in, 90, 100, 120,
 154, 158, 162-6, 173, 226-7,
 272n50, 275n75, 276n4, 276-7n5
 "Guatemala," 44-51
 "Guatemala es un desierto," 280-1n2
Guatemala: una interpretación histórico-
social (C. Guzmán Böckler and
 J. L. Herbert), 85
Gulliver's Travels (Jonathan Swift), 179
 Gutiérrez, Victor Manuel, 107, 163
 Guzmán Böckler, Carlos, 39-40, 85,
 257n12
 "Hambriento grita y tú no le das, El,"
 268n29
 Harss, Luis: on Asturias's
 "phantomimes," 88, 263n4; on As-
 turias's use of language, 280n1; on
 Asturias's writing, 134, 166; on *Hom-*
 bres de maíz, 138; interview by, 22; on
 politics, 165
 Hartmann, Geoffrey, 227
 Haya de la Torre, Victor Raúl, 38
 Hayumihaha, 176, 220
 Heath, Stephen, 5

- Herbert, Jean-Loup, 39–40, 85, 257n12
- Hermenéutica y praxis del indigenismo: la novela indigenista de Clorinda Matto a José María Arguedas* (Julio Rodríguez-Luis), 13
- Hernández, J. R., 35–6
- heterogeneity, 49
- Hijom, Gaspar, 90–1
- Himmelblau, Jack, 7; on Asturias's conception of love, 121–2, 270–1n43; on Asturias's depiction of women, 268n28; on Asturias's politics, 10
- "History of the Maya Area" (F. V. Scholes and R. L. Roys), 146
- Hombres de maíz*: as actualization, 132; agricultural community in, 247; analysis of, 104–6; animals in, 141–50, 158–60; ants in, 234; author-creator in, 259n21; call for reform in, 106, 127–8, 154; characterization in, 183; character substitution in, 100; colors in, 154–60; compared to *Mulata de tal*, 168–9, 173, 179–80, 180–1, 189, 200, 226, 237; compared to *Popol Vuh*, 267n19; criticism of, 3, 4–6, 7, 188, 255n2, 264–5n9, 282n12; diachronic development in, 99; Dionysian element of, 228; duality in, 247; evolution in, 273–4n60; goal of, 137–8; hope in, 133–4; importance of, 8, 15; Indians in, 243, 267–8n26; inspiration for, 90–1, 265n10, 282n8; legend in, 130–2; and "Los brujos de la tormenta primavera," 76; magic realism in, 130–7; Mayan mythology in, 277–8n13; message of, 161–2, 166, 272n49, 275n75; misunderstanding of, 1; moral content of, 271n47; mutilation in, 110, 176; as *neo-Indigenismo*, 251; numbers in, 150–4, 158–60; oedipal complex in, 269n34; as personal statement, 239–40; and politics, 10; property in, 198; resolution in, 123–7; sexuality in, 256n6, 271n46; structure of, 91–2, 138–40, 220, 248, 249–50; surrealism in, 277–8n13; transformation in, 129–30; unity in, 107–8; unity of, 9, 92–8; utopia in, 236; women in, 108–11, 120–3, 268n30
- homosexuality, 187, 191
- Hop-Cotzih* (Francisco Romero Rodas), 271–2n48
- How to Do Things with Words* (J. L. Austin), 272n50
- Huasanga: and eroticizing death, 211; and excrement, 206; role of, 220; and sadism, 186
- Huasipungo* (Jorge Icaza), 38, 138
- Hunahpu: and ants, 272–3n53; Asturias's awareness of, 72–3; compared to Gaspar Ilóm, 93–4, 97–8, 106, 108, 148–9; compared to Indians in *Hombres de maíz*, 267–8n26; compared to Nicho Aquino, 127, 147; and corn, 82, 93; and creation myth, 153–4, 158, 160; decapitation of, 102, 213, 266n15, 274n63; epithets for, 267n20; and fireflies, 274n62; as fish, 266n16; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 266n13; linked with Chilitic, 279n29; linked with fertility, 274n63; and number nine, 262n32; role of, 74–5, 77–8, 107–8, 248, 262n32; and Seven Macaw, 79; transformations of, 266n12
- Hunahpu-Utiu, 144
- Hurakan: Asturias's awareness of, 71–3; depiction of, 54–5, 77–8; role of, 262n31
- Huxley, Aldous, 150
- Huxley, Francis, 142
- Icaza, Jorge: compared to Asturias, 76; *Huasipungo*, 38; *Raza de bronce*, 138
- iconoclasm, 118
- "Ideales que han faltado a Guatemala," 280–1n2
- idealism, 238–9, 246–7, 253–4
- identity: Asturias's, 24, 30; cultural, 240; loss of, in *Mulata de tal*, 221–2
- Ilóm, Gaspar: compared to Hunahpu, 106; and creation, 261–2n30; death of, 100, 103, 122–3, 125, 266n15; depiction of, 42, 69, 78, 97, 105–6, 107–8, 147–9, 158, 253; as fish, 266n12, 267n25; and Goyo Yic, 92; importance of, 139–40, 180–1; and indigenous culture, 253; linked with seven, 151; and Pijosa Grande, 109–10; sacrifice of, 93–4; and sexuality, 271n46; transformation of, 131; and water, 96
- Imaginación y violencia en América* (Ariel Dorfman), 5
- Imbert, Enrique Anderson, 264n9
- Imparcial*, *El*, 28, 88, 212, 243
- Indianista*, 41, 255–6n4; in contrast to Asturias's approach, 245
- Indian revolt, 265n10
- Indians: Asturias's identification with, 26–7, 256n2; Asturias's opinion of, 11–12, 30–1, 271n47, 281n3, n4, n5; depictions of, 20–2, 37–42, 140, 242–3, 252–4, 257n14, 258–9n16, 259n20, 259–60n26, 267–8n26, 269–70n37; influence of Aztec, on Asturias, 229–30; in "Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido," 63; in

- Mexican literature, 257n13; "pot-latch" to, 174; *see also* Mayan culture; Mayan mythology
- Indigenismo*: and Asturias, 12; criticism of, 13-14; depictions of Indians in, 38-42; elements of, 255-6n4, 257n12; naive idealism of, 247; new writings about, 13; novels of, responding to mimetic canons, 138; themes of, 272n52
- "Indispensable necesidad de organizar el partido político de los campesinos," 263-4n5
- International Student Congress, 20
- intertextuality, 3, 76, 137
- inversion, 218-19
- "Invierno," 121
- Ix Tab, 146
- jaguar: linked with deer, 274n66; linked with seven, 151; in Mayan mythology, 146
- Jakobson, Roman, 9, 139
- Jasmine, 147, 155-6
- Jaundice Master, 279n24
- Joyce, James: compared to Asturias, 12, 139, 244, 249, 263n4, 269n35; *Ulysses*, 5, 139, 249; and Western literary tradition, 118-19
- Jung, Carl: on anima, 114; Asturias's awareness of, 197; on individuation, 114; influence of, on Asturias, 115, 233; reacting against paternal function, 119
- Kingdom of This World* (Alejo Carpentier), 130, 223
- Knight, F. H., 161
- Knorosov, Valentin, 260-1n29
- Kristal, Efraim, 13, 258n15
- Kristeva, Julia, 118-19, 272n51
- Lacan, Jacques, 25-7, 118-19, 140
- Laing, R. D. (*The Politics of Experience*), 235
- Landa, Diego de, 261n29
- land reform, 162-6
- language: Asturias's use of, 272n50, 280n1; as catalyst of action, 125, 238; and discontinuity, 227; to motivate reality, 134; schizophrenic, 231-2; use of, to educate, 43; use of, to heal, 135
- Latin American literature, 3-5
- Latin Press Agency, *see* Prensa Latina
- laughter: linked with carnival, 215; in *Mulata de tal*, 178-80, 217-18, 222, 278n19
- legend, 130-2
- Lent, 225-6
- León Hill, Eliada, 32
- León Mera, Juan, 41
- Letras de México*, 88
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude: on animals, 146; *Le Cru et le cuit*, 141; on *nahualismo*, 104; on mythical thought, 108
- Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, 32
- "Leyenda de la Tatuana," 59-60
- "Leyenda del Cadejo," 57-9
- "Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido," 62-3, 76
- "Leyenda del Volcán," 54-6
- Leyendas de Guatemala*: analysis of, 64-6, 241; compared to *Mulata de tal*, 237; construction of, 42-4; criticism of, 1, 3, 4-6; duality in, 247; eroticism in, 35; importance of, 8, 15; Indians in, 22, 245; Mayan mythology in, 90; message of, 241, 253; surrealism in, 4, 9-10, 249-50
- "Leyendas del Sombrerón," 44, 60-2, 64, 257n9
- Lezama Lima, José, 2, 207
- Liberal Progresista*, *El*, 86
- Lienhard, Martin, 13, 252
- Life Against Death* (Norman O. Brown), 238
- linking: in *Hombres de maíz*, 101; in *Leyendas de Guatemala*, 64, 81; in "Leyendas del Sombrerón," 61-2
- literature: *Indigenismo* 13, 258n15, 272n52; Latin American, 3-5, 247-8, 282n11; Mexican, 257n13; *neo-Indigenismo*, 3, 14-15, 27, 35-6, 37-42, 65-6, 250-4, 262-3n39, 270n42, 282n13; Peruvian, 13-14; Western, 118
- Literature y sociedad en el Perú: la novela indigenista* (Antonio Cornejo Polar), 13
- "Loas a Santa María del Rosario," 269-70n37
- Lombardo de Caso, María, 257n13
- London, 27-8
- López Alvarez, Luis: on Asturias's childhood, 242; on Asturias's education, 19; on Asturias in Europe, 256-7n7; on Asturias's political activity, 255n3; interview by, 22; on María Rosales, 116
- love, 109
- "Lucas, El," 90-1
- "Luis Garrafita," 91, 245; origins of, 284n8
- Lukács, Gyorgy, 209
- l'un dans l'autre*, 46-9, 279n23
- Macaw, 78-81
- Machoión, 91, 110-11, 151

- Machojón, Vaca Manuela, 93, 94, 110
 madness: Asturias's use of, 232-3, 234, 256n3; in *Leyendas de Guatemala*, 53, 80; in *Mulata de tal*, 231-2, 236-7; as principle of creation, 229
Madness and Literature (Lillian Feder), 228-9
 "Madre, tú me inventaste," 116
 magic realism, 130-7
Maladrón: importance of, 8; intertextuality in, 3; misunderstanding of, 1
 Mallarmé, Stéphane, 43, 269n35
Manifesto for a Theater That Failed (Antonin Artaud), 280n35
 Manuela, Vaca, *see* Machojón, Vaca Manuela
 Mariátegui, J. C., 14, 252
 María the Rain: depiction of, 96-7; linked with moon, 275n74; role of, 105-6, 261-2n30
 Marroquín Rojas, Clemente, 27
 Martín, Gerald: on Asturias in psychoanalysis, 197; on Asturias's family life, 120; on Asturias's opinion of Mayan culture, 263n11; on Asturias's politics, 6; on Asturias's writing, 7-8, 88, 216, 228, 229-30, 280n33; on Clemencia Amado, 23; on fish, 267n25; on *Hombres de maíz*, 90, 115-16, 120-3, 127, 264n8, 270n41, 273-4n60; on "Machojón," 91; on *El problema social del indio*, 281n6; on Richard Callan, 114
 masochism, 187-8
 Master Almond Tree, 59-60
 Matto de Turner, Clorinda, 255n4
 Mauss, Marcel: *The Gift*, 161; influence of, on Asturias, 32, 172, 200, 233; on "potlatch," 174; on "primitive cultures," 243-4
Maya History and Religion (Eric Thompson), 141, 151
 Mayan culture: Asturias's awareness of, 30-3, 37, 67-70, 243-4; Asturias's opinion of, 244-5; historic epochs of, 9, 42, 75; influence of, on *Mulata de tal*, 229-30; *see also* Indians
 Mayan mythology: in Asturias's writing, 55-6, 249-50, 259-60n23, 277-8n13; influence of, on Asturias, 240, 249, 260-2n9; *see also* *Popol Vuh*
 "Meditaciones del pie descalzo," 243
 Meléndez, Concha: *La novela indigenista en Hispanoamérica, 1823-1899*, 13; studies by, 255-6n4
 Melville, Thomas and Marjorie, 275n75
 Meneses, Carlos, 243
 Menippea, 218
 Menomini (Indians), 146
 Menton, Seymour: on *Hombres de maíz*, 4, 99, 100, 264n9; on *Indigenismo*, 13; on *El señor presidente*, 264n9
 Mera, Juan León, 41
 Merchant of Priceless Jewels, 59-60
mestizaje, 20-1
 methodology, 8-12
Miguel Angel Asturias (Richard Callan), 5, 228
Miguel Angel Asturias dans le Paris des "années folles" (Marc Cheymol), 8
Miguel Angel Asturias. Paris 1924-1933. Periodismo y creación literaria (Amos Segala), 7
 Miguelita de Acatán: Hilario's story of, 133-5; as runaway, 112; unattainability of, 114
 Miller, Mary Ellen, 260-1n29
 Moncha, 135
 money, *see* gold
 Monteforte Toledo, Mario, 106, 272n52
 Monterde, Francisco, 31-2
 Montparnasse, 33
 moon: in "Cuculcán, 81; emblems of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 266n13; glyph for, 70; linked with María Tecún, 96-7, 129; linked with María the Rain, 96, 275n74; linked with *Mulata*, 169, 181; linked with water, 262n38, 266n14; linked with white, 275n74; linked with yellow, 262n37; in *Mulata de tal*, 180-2
 Mora y Araujo, Blanca: Asturias's marriage with, 203, 270n38; on Asturias's reading interests, 11; on "Colonel Chalo Godoy," 91; influence of, on Asturias, 240, 270n40
 mother, *see* Rosales, María
Mulata: and "Apollonian," 230-1; and communitarian values, 253; destruction of, 208; and Dionysus, 229-31; and duality, 220; and eroticizing death, 211-12; fragmentation of, 209; greed of, 176; and grotesque exaggeration, 222; identity of, 222; and laughter, 218; linked with moon, 181; malevolence of, 121; marriage to Celestino Yumí, 221; and masochism, 187; meaning of, 277n10; possessed by Cashtoc, 191; role of, 169-71, 182, 192-3, 202, 214, 253; as runaway, 112; and sadism, 186; and sodomy, 195; and sterility, 181-2, 184, 224; as synthesis of Eros and Death, 191
Mulata de tal, narrative features of, 247; black in, 204, 206; characterization

- in, 183; grotesque exaggeration in, 215-16, 219, 222-3; Mayan mythology in, 277-8n13; structure of, 169-70, 204-7, 227-8, 248, 250
- Mulata de tal*, thematic content of: anal symbolic complex in, 197-200, 203-5, 207; as antiestablishment, 171-2; breeding in, 210; carnivalesque features of, 213-15, 217, 227; carnivalesque imagery in, 227; castration in, 187; communalism in, 172-3; coprophilia in, 195; death in, 211-12, 223-6; desire in, 123; despair in, 177; destruction in, 234-5; Devil in, 205-7; Dionysian frenzy in, 228-30; duality in, 219-21, 247; and egoic experience, 235-6; eroticism in, 35; excrement in, 198, 201-2; expenditure in, 173-5; female sadism in, 113; fragmentation in, 208-9; gold in, 195-6; greed in, 175-7; homosexuality in, 191; iconoclasm in, 118; identity in, 221-2; inversion in, 218-19; laughter in, 178-80, 217-18; madness in, 231-2, 232-3, 234; masochism in, 187-8; moon in, 180-1; mutilation in, 176, 201, 213; necrophilia in, 193-4; sadism in, 185-7; selfishness in, 246-7; sexuality in, 201-2; sodomy in, 195; sterility in, 177-8, 181-2, 183-5, 195-6; transformations in, 278n17; zoophilia in, 194-5
- Mulata de tal* and Asturias's conception: compared to *Hombres de maíz*, 168-9, 188-9; inspiration for, 166-8; language in, 207-8; Mayan beliefs in, 213; message of, 10-11, 161-2, 183, 198-9, 207-9, 212-13, 226-7, 236-7; as mirror of Asturias's feelings, 240; optimism in, 246-7; as personal statement, 196-7, 239-40; role of *Mulata* in, 182; social commentary in, 166, 276n2; surrealism in, 277-8n13, 279n23; and unconscious, 233-4
- Mulata de tal* and critics' perception, 1, 3, 4-6, 8, 15, 230-1
- Mumford, L., 212
- Mundo es ancho y ajeno*, *El* (Ciro Alegria), 38, 65
- mutilation: and anal complex, 207; in *Mulata*, 176, 201, 213
- mystification, *see* madness
- mythology, Mayan: in Asturias's writing, 55-6, 249-50, 259-60n23, 277-8n13; influence of, on Asturias, 213, 240, 249, 260-1n29; *see also* *Popol Vuh*
- "Nacionalización de las tierras debe preocupar a los guatemaltecos, La," 263-4n5
- nahual*, 55, 69, 104, 126, 147; Goyo's, 141
- nahualismo*, 104-5
- National Congress, 87
- Navas Ruiz, Ricardo, 36
- necrophilia, 193-4
- neo-Indigenismo*: Asturias on, 282n13; Asturias's brand of, 1, 25, 27, 35-6, 161, 239-40; birth of, 37-42, 65-6, 137; elements of, 250-4, 262-3n39; importance of, 14-15; José María Arguedas and, 14-15, 38, 251-2; sexuality in, 270n42; symbolism in, 3
- Nicho-Coyote, *see* Aquino, Nicho
- Nicholson, Nigel, 111-12
- Nido, 54-6; and Asturias's mother, 116
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 190, 230-4
- nine: and Chorro de Horizontes, 73; and Cuculcán, 262n35; and Hunahpu, 262n32; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 151-4; *see also* numbers
- Ninica, 112
- Niniløj, 176
- Nouhaud, Dorita, 8, 280n33
- novela de la tierra*, 2, 4, 251
- Novela indigenista en Hispanoamérica, 1823-1899, La* (Concha Meléndez), 13
- "Now that I remember," 51-4
- numbers: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 150-4, 158-60; *see also* nine; seven; three; two
- oedipal complex: in *Hombres de maíz*, 269n34; suffered by Asturias, 25-6, 115-20
- Oficio de timieblas* (Rosario Castellanos), 14, 252, 271n44
- "Ojo nuevo," 280-1n2
- Ojos de los enterrados*, *Los*, 2
- One Artisan, 272-3n53
- One Death, 77
- One Hunahpu: and black, 274n69; death of, 100, 103; fire test of, 267n18; role of, 74, 76-7, 248
- One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Gabriel García Márquez), 4, 46, 221, 223
- One Monkey, 272-3n53
- opossum: as epithet for Hunahpu, 267n20; etymology of, 273n55; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 104, 138, 141-5, 158, 160; linked with corn, 273n56; linked with white, 157,

- 273n55; as part of creation couple, 273n54
 optimism, 238-9, 246-7, 253-4
 Ortiz, I. Humberto, 107
 Oxip-Quieh, 271-2n48
- Padre Horán, El* (Narciso Aréstegui), 42, 258n15
 palimpsest, 10, 43, 92, 108, 130
 Palma y Palma, Eulogia, 35-6
Papa verde, El, 2
 Paris, 27-8, 37, 243-4, 259-60n28
 Parroquia, La, 17-18
 Paso, Fernando del, 2
 Paul III (Pope), 278n19
 Paz, Octavio, 134
 Pelele, 125
 Pellecer, Carlos Manuel, 20, 163
Perpetual Orgy, The (Mario Vargas Llosa), 247-8
 Peru, literature in, 13-14
Phaedrus (Plato), 236
 "phantomimes," 88, 263n4
 Picasso, Pablo, 244
 Pillement, Georges, 91, 282n8
 Pilón, Marta, 87
 Plato, 190, 236
 pleasure principle: in *Mulata de tal*, 184-5; rejection of, 200
 Plumed Serpent, 78-81
 poetry, 269n32
point sublime, 61-2
 polarity, 51-3, 58
 politics, 6, 10, 19-20, 44, 87, 89, 164-6, 245-6, 255n3, 277n7
Politics of Experience, The (R. D. Laing), 235
Polylogue (Julia Kristeva), 118-19
 Ponce Vaidez, Federico, 87, 89
Popol Vuh: ants in, 272-3n53; black in, 274n69; and "Los Brujos de la tormenta primaveral," 70-8; characters in, 158; cohesion of, 101-3; compared to "Leyenda del Volcán," 55; corn in, 141, 142; coyotes in, 144; creation in, 152-4, 158, 160, 261-2n30, 273n54; and "Cuculcán," 79, 82; decay in, 279n24; epithets for, 267n19; fertility in, 52; firefly in, 146; four in, 152; and *Hombres de maíz*, 92, 93, 99-103, 107-8, 123-7, 249-50, 266n12; influence of, on Asturias, 12, 67-70, 248, 259-60n23; narrative structure of, 98-9, 249; rabbits in, 150; research on, 260-1n29; translation of, 31-2
Popol Vuh, histoire culturelle des maya-quichés, Le (Raphaël Girard), 266n14
- Poppy-man, 57-8
 Popular University, *see* Universidad Popular
 Portal, Marta, 13
Portrait of a Marriage (Nigel Nicholson), 111-12
 positivism, 242, 245
 "potlatch," 174
 Pound, Ezra, 150
 Powelson, John P., 276-7n5
 Poyé, Juan, 70-2, 74, 77
 Poyé, Juana, 70-2, 74, 77
 Pozas, Ricardo, 257n13
 Prensa Latina, 28-30, 37, 256-7n7
 Preuss, Mary, 273n54
 "Principle of Loss, The" (Georges Bataille), 174
Problema social del indio, El: 238; analysis of, 242-3; defense of, 17, 20-2; Indians in, 245; racism in, 21, 243; social concerns in, 271n47
 profane, 200-2
Prometeo vencedor (José Vasconcelos), 16, 20, 166-8, 245-6
 Prometheus, 167-8, 246
 Propp, Vladimir, 8, 44
 psychoanalysis: Asturias as student of, 196; influence of, on Asturias, 11, 250; and *Mulata de tal*, 203-4; performed on Asturias, 11, 196-7
 psychotic symptom, 227; *see also* madness
 Puj, Juana, 176
 Purefoy, Ambassador, 165
 Pus Master, 279n24
 Puti, Juana, 176
 Puti, Lili, 176, 220
- Quetzalcoat, 141
 Quintana, Epaminondas, 27
- rabbit, 94, 144-5, 149-50, 158
 Rabelais, François, 215
 racism: Asturias and, 21-2, 37, 242, 281n4-5
 Rama, Angel, 13, 40, 242
 Ray, Man, 47
 Raynaud, Georges, 26, 30-2, 49, 69, 145, 203, 249
Raza de bronce (Alcides Arguedas), 38, 138, 244-5
 reality principle, 184-5
 Recinos, Adrián, 69-70
 recipient-oriented fiction, 100-1
 red: in *Hombres de maíz*, 156-7; in Mayan mythology, 275n71; *see also* colors
 regeneration, *see* breeding
 Reinosa, Candelaria: and relationship

- with Machojón, 110–11; transformation of, 131; and yellow, 155
- remembering, 132–3
- Repertorio Americano*, 88
- reproduction, *see* breeding
- resolution, 64–6
- "Responso," 122
- Revolución de Octubre, 87
- Reyes, Alfonso, 33, 43
- Reyes, Lola, 18, 24
- Richman, Michele, 169
- Rifaterre, Michael, 138
- Rimbaud, Arthur, 53
- Rivet, Paul, 32
- Rodríguez-Luis, Julio, 13
- Rodríguez Monegal, Emir, 2
- Romero Rodas, Francisco, 271–2n28
- Rosales, María: Asturias's feeling for, 115–18; death of, 197, 270n38, n40; influence of, on Asturias, 17–18, 23–7, 119–20, 269–70n37
- Roys, R. L., 146
- Rubín, Ramón: and *Ciclo de Chiapas*, 257n13; *El Callado Dolor de los Tzotziles*, 272n52
- runaways, 95, 108, 112, 114, 120, 122, 123, 129
- "Sabiduría indígena," 238
- Sacayón, Hilario: compared to Asturias, 22, 269n34; importance of, 130–1; and Miguelita de Acatán, 114, 133–4; and myth, 135–6
- sacred, 200–2
- sadism, 113, 121, 185–7; and anal phase, 208
- Sáenz, Jimena: on Asturias's childhood, 17, 256n2; on Asturias's drinking, 196; on Asturias's education, 27; on Asturias's writing, 262n34; criticism of, 21; interview by, 22; on María Rosales, 116
- Salamá, 12, 18
- Salazar, Toño, 33
- Sánchez, Nestor, 4
- Sarduy, Severo, 4, 119, 207, 247
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino, 21
- Saturnino: on breeding, 278n15, n21, n22; importance of, 167–8; role of, in *Prometeo vencedor*, 246–7
- Saussure, Ferdinand de, 139
- "sauvages," 179–80, 278n19
- scatological references, *see* excrement
- Schele, Linda, 260–1n29
- schizophrenic speech in *Mulata*, 231–2
- Schneegans, Heinrich, 217
- Scholes, F. V., 146
- Scorza, Manuel, 14–15, 251–2
- Segala, Amos, 7–8
- semiotic, 118–19
- Senghor, Léopold (*Poemi Africani*), 30
- Señor presidente, El*: as art, 2–3; awards for, 203; compared to Banana trilogy, 3; compared to *Mulata de tal*, 237; criticism of, 264n9; Dionysian element of, 228; linguistics of, 4; message of, 166; publication of, 87–8; sexuality in, 109; surrealism in, 216; totalitarianism in, 124
- Serpiente con Chorro de Horizontes, 72–3, 75
- seven: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 151, 158, 160, 249, 274n61, n66; *see also* numbers
- Seven Death, 77
- Seven Hunahpu: and black, 274n69; death of, 100, 103; fire test of, 267n18; role of, 74, 76–7, 248
- sexuality: and death, 184; depictions of, 25, 27, 35, 108–11, 256n6; in *Hombres de maíz*, 270n40, 271n46; linked with excrement, 201–2; and madness, 194; in *Mulata de tal*, 210; in *neo-Indigenismo*, 270n42; and transgression, 185
- Siberia Blues* (Nestor Sánchez), 4
- sideshow, 215
- Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (J. C. Mariátegui), 14
- Sigumonta, 211
- Siguana: and eroticizing death, 211; malevolence of, 113
- Siguanaba, 211
- snake, 144–5, 147–8; in *Mulata*, 194
- sociology, 196
- sodomy, 195
- "Soledad frente al mar," 268n29
- Soler y Pérez, Ernesto, 86
- Soluna*, 12
- Sommers, Joseph, 13, 42
- Sonetos*, 88
- "Sonetos a María," 116–18
- Spaniards: Asturias's opinion of, 258–9n16; in "Leyenda del tesoro del Lugar Florido," 63
- Spengler, O., 29, 212
- Stein, Gertrude, 244, 263n4
- sterility: and fire, 95; in *Hombres de maíz*, 94–5, 131; linked with homosexuality, 191; in *Mulata de tal*, 169, 177–8, 180, 183–5, 188, 195–6, 200; of women, 24, 35
- Strong Wind*, 166
- Suarez, 244–5
- Sudden Bloodletter, 75
- sun, 180–1, 266n13

- Sur*, 91
 surrealism: Asturias's use of, 33-7, 240, 277-8n13; in "Cuculcán," 81-4; in "Guatemala," 47-9; in *Leyendas de Guatemala*, 9-10, 249; in "Leyendas del Sombrerón," 61-2; in *Mulata de tal*, 279n23; techniques of, 45-7, 48, 51, 53, 55, 56, 61
 Swift, Jonathan, 179

 Tatuana, 112
 Tazol: and Celestino Yumí, 113, 183-4; and Catalina Zabala, 219, as dry corn leaves, 199-200; and excrement, 206; on hope, 237; role of, 169-71, 204, 214; and sterility, 178, 185; and "sauvages," 179; *see also* Devil
 Tazolín, 219-20
 Tazolito, 206
 Tearing Jaguar, 75
 Tecún, María: compared to Catalina Zabala, 168-9; and cultural evolution, 143; depiction of, 69-70, 128-9; and Hilario Sacayón, 135; importance of, 272n49; legendary basis of, 271-2n48; linked with María the Rain, 275n74; as María the Rain, 96-7; as matriarchal feature, 122; and reunion with Goyo Yic, 120-1, 240; role of, 104-6; as runaway, 112; transformation of, 131
 "tecunas," 105, 123, 129, 157
 Tecún brothers, 95
 Tecún Umán, 67-8, 271-2n48
 Tedlock, Barbara, 260-1n29
 Tedlock, Dennis, 16; on creation, 261-2n30; and Mayan literacy, 260-1n29; on *Popol Vuh*, 267n19; translation of *Popol Vuh* by, 69-70
Tel Quel, 4
 Terrón, Isabra, 105-6, 112
 Thanatos, 190, 210
Theater and Its Double, The (Antonin Artaud), 280n35
 thirteen: importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 151-4, 158, 160, 249
 Thompson, Eric: on caves, 271n44; on colors, 154-5, 157; on decapitation, 266n15; on dogs, 147, 274n70; on fish, 148-9; *Maya History and Religion*, 141; on Mayan ceremony, 126; on numbers, 150, 151, 153; on snakes, 148; on three, 259-60n23; on water, 149; on yellow, 262n37
 three, 144-5; and conception of *Hombres de maíz*, 189, 248; in "Cuculcán," 262n35; as fire symbol and rain deity in Mayan mythology, 259n23; as number of episodes in *Mulata*, 201; as number of ingredients in *Popol Vuh*, and rabbit, 149; and sets of animals, 147; and thematic pinions in *Mulata*, 198, 248
Three Trapped Tigers, 4
 Timo, Don, 212, 218
 Timoteo, Teo, 176, 215
 Tipumal, 206
 Tlazolteotl, 121
 Toci, 265-6n11, 275n73
Todas las sangres (José María Arguedas), 38
 "Todo se va a quedar," 268n29
 Tohil, 71-3, 77-8
 Tojonabales, Pancho, 209
 Tomasa, 18
Transculturación narrativa en América Latina (Angel Rama), 13, 40
 transformations: of Candelaria Reinosa, 131; of Catalina Zabala, 176, 188-9, 219-21; of Celestino Yumí, 176, 188-9, 208-9, 219-21; of Father Chimalpín, 189; of Gaspar Ilóm, 131; in *Hombres de maíz*, 129-30; of María Tecún, 131; in *Mulata de tal*, 278n17; in *Popol Vuh*, 266n12
Tres de cuatro soles: 255n1; importance of, 8; intertextuality in, 3; misunderstanding of, 1
 "Tres de cuatro sueños," 66-7
 triadic system: in *Hombres de maíz*, 144; in *Mulata*, 248
 Tupuc, Evaristo, 176
 Tuy, Domingo, 208
 two: in *Mulata*, 189, 193, 199; as structuring device, 191, 221
 Tzara, Tristan: and conductive threads, 56; imagery of, 83-4; influence of, on Asturias, 33, 249
 Tzotzil Maya, 252
 Tzul, Anastasio, 265n10

 Ubico, Jorge, 6, 86-9, 277n6
Ulysses (James Joyce), 5, 139, 249
 Unamuno, Miguel de, 28, 127
 unattainability: theme of, 112-14, 121; of women, 24, 268n29
 Unionista party, 19, 245
 United Fruit Company: in Banana trilogy, 166; and downfall of Jacobo Arbenz, 162-5; and John Foster Dulles, 277n6
 United States, 163-5
 unity: in Asturias's writing, 248-9; in *Hombres de maíz*, 9, 107-8; in *Popol Vuh*, 101-3
Universal Ilustrado, El, 88
 Universidad Popular, 19-20, 86, 245
 Updike, John, 205

- Uslar Pietri, Arturo, 33
 "Uso de razón, El," 280-1n2
 U.S. State Department, 16
- Valéry, Paul, 5, 66, 86, 136, 263n2
 Vallejo, César, 33
 Vargas Llosa, Mario, 112, 247-8
 Vasconcelos, José: on breeding, 278n15, n21-2, 280n30; fused with Nietzsche, 234; on human advancement, 280n31, n32; influence of, on Asturias, 20-1, 211, 233-4, 245-7; on leisure time, 277n11; *Prometeo vencedor*, 16, 166-8
 "Venganza del indio, La": Indians in, 245; style of, 240-1; writing of, 90-1
Viento fuerte, 2, 270n40
Viernes de Dolores, 276n2, 282n10
 violence, 52, 109
- Wak-Hunahpu, 144
 water: animals associated with, 144-5; in *Hombres de maíz*, 78, 95-8, 107, 148-50, 156-7, 248, 267n25; linked with moon, 262n38, 266n14; in Mayan mythology, 248-9; in *Popol Vuh*, 101
 wealth, *see* gold
Week-end in Guatemala: Asturias on, 282n13; compared to *El señor presidente*, 3; compared to *Mulata de tal*, 224; Jacobo Arbenz in, 166; style of, 216
 white: Asturias on, 275n72; importance of, in *Hombres de maíz*, 69, 157, 158, 160, 249, 275n73; linked with moon, 275n74; *see also* colors
 Willis, Susan, 278n19
 Willka, Rendón, 38
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 214
Wives of Ipswich, The (John Updike), 205
 women: Asturias's attitude toward, 120-3; depictions of, 24-5, 108-11, 112-14, 268n28, n30, 269-70n37; as evil, 113; as madness, 80; as run-aways, 95, 108, 112, 114, 123, 129; unattainability of, 24, 112-14, 268n29
 words, *see* language
- Xbalanque: and ants, 272-3n53; and corn, 82; and creation myth, 153; death of, 93, 102; epithets for, 267n20; and fireflies, 274n62; in *Hombres de maíz*, 266n13; linked with Chiltic, 279n29; and moon, 158; and rabbits, 150; role of, 74-5, 248; and Seven Macaw, 79; transformations of, 266n12
 Xipe, 156
- Xmucané, 74
 Xpiyacoc, 74
- Yai, 80-1
 yellow: in *Hombres de maíz*, 154-5, 158, 160, 249, 274n68; in Mayan mythology, 262n37, 278n20; *see also* colors
 Yellow Flower, role of, 80-1
 Yepes Boscán, Guillermo, 34
 Yic, Goyo: as ant, 141; and creation, 261-2n30; depictions of, 26, 42, 69-70, 78, 96, 97, 158; evolution of, 272n49; and Gaspar Ilóm, 92; importance of, 103, 104-6, 107-8, 123, 140, 154, 155, 160, 168-9, 180-1, 189, 253, 275n75; and Indian culture, 253; linked with fish, 267n25; linked with four and nine, 152-4; as model farmer, 10, 107; and Nicho Aquino, 124, 267n20; as nomad, 122; as opossum, 141-4; return of children of, 95; and reunion with María Tecún, 120-1, 240; rite of passage of, 99-100; and sexuality, 256n6; as vagabond, 266n12
 Yumí, Celestino: and carnival, 214-16; and communitarian values, 253; depictions of, 175, 209; dissatisfaction of, 278n17; greed of, 176, 196, 198, 277n9; and grotesque exaggeration, 219, 222; identity of, 221-2, 277n8; importance of, 168-9, 169-71, 192, 204, 214, 253; and inversion, 218-19; and laughter, 217, 218; linking sexuality and excrement, 200-2; and Mulata, 181-2, 221; and regeneration, 224-5; and "sauvages," 179; schizophrenic speech of, 232; and Siguana, 113; and sterility, 178, 183-4; transformations of, 176, 188-9, 208-9, 219-21; as vagabond, 279n29; values of, 212
- Zabala, Catalina: compared to María Tecún, 168-9; and currency, 277n9; depiction of, 209; and excrement, 206; and grotesque exaggeration, 219; identity of, 221-2; and inversion, 218-19; role of, 169-71, 204, 214; and sadism, 186; transformations of, 176, 188-9, 219-21; as vagabond, 279n29
- Zac, 157
 Zacatón, María, 157
 Zacatón (family), 95, 265-6n11, 275n73
 Zim, Diego, 208
 Zip, 146
 zoophilia, 194-5
Zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo, El (José María Arguedas), 38, 282-3n14