

A Writer from Mexico

CARLOS FUENTES

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at
The University of Utah

May 3 and 4, 1983

CARLOS FUENTES, novelist and playwright, lived and studied in countries around the world as the son of a career diplomat and Mexican ambassador to Holland, Panama, Portugal, and Italy. He was educated at the University of Mexico and at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Internationales in Geneva. Later, as a diplomat himself, Mr. Fuentes continued his travels as secretary to the Mexican member of the United Nations International Law Commission in Geneva, as director of International Cultural Relations for Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and eventually as Mexican ambassador to France.

Mr. Fuentes has written prolifically from a perspective of three distinct cultures, he explains — Latin American, North American, and European. His experience in New Deal America, wartime Chile and Argentina, then Mexico and Europe provided rich breeding ground for his first novels, and he also credits writers Alfonso Reyes and Octavio Paz of Mexico, Pablo Neruda of Chile, and writers of the post-war generation in Europe with providing important contributions to his own development.

I

I was born on November 11, 1928, under the sign I would have chosen anyway, Scorpio, and on a date shared with Dostoevsky, Cromelynk and Vonnegut. My mother was rushed from a steaming movie house in those days before Colonel Buendia took his son to discover ice in the tropics. She was seeing King Vidor's version of *La Bohème* with John Gilbert and Lillian Gish. Perhaps the pangs of my birth were provoked by this anomaly: a silent screen version of Puccini's opera. Since then the operatic and the cinematographic have tugged at war with my words, as if expecting that the Scorpio of fiction shall rise from silent music and from blind images.

All of this, let me add to clear up my biography, took place in the sweltering heat of Panama City, where my father was beginning his diplomatic career as an *attaché* to the Mexican Legation (in those days, Embassies were established only in the most important capitals, no place where the mean average year-round temperature was in the perpetual nineties). Since my father was a convinced Mexican nationalist, the problem of where I should be born had to be resolved under the sign, not of Scorpio, but of the Eagle and the Serpent. Yet the Mexican Legation, although it had extraterritorial rights, did not even have a territorial midwife; and the minister, a fastidious bachelor from Sinaloa called Ignacio Norris, who resembled the poet Quevedo as one pince-nez resembles another, would have none of me suddenly appearing on the Legation parquet, even if the Angel Gabriel had announced me as a future Mexican writer of some, although debatable, merit.

So if I could not be born in a fictitious, extraterritorial Mexico, neither would I be born in that even more fictitious extension of the United States of America, the Canal Zone, where the best hos-

pitals, naturally, were. So between two territorial fictions and a mercifully silent close-up of John Gilbert, I arrived in the nick of time at the Gorgas Hospital in Panama City at eleven o'clock that night.

The problem of my baptism then arose. As if the waters of the two nearby oceans touching one another through the iron fingertips of the Canal were not enough, I had to undergo a double ceremony: my religious baptism took place in Panama, because my mother, a devout Roman Catholic, demanded it with as much urgency as Tristram Shandy's parents, although with less original methods. My nationalist baptism, however, took place a few months later in Mexico City, where my father, an incorrigible Jacobin and priest-eater until the end, insisted that I be registered in the civil books established by Benito Juárez. Thus, I appear as a native of Mexico City for all legal purposes, and this anomaly further illustrates a central fact of my life and my writing: I am a Mexican by will and by imagination.

All of this came to a head in the 1930's. By then, my father was counselor of the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C., and I grew up in the vibrant world of the American thirties, more or less between the inauguration of Citizen Roosevelt and the interdiction of Citizen Kane. When I arrived here, Dick Tracy had just met Tess Truehart. As I left, Clark Kent was meeting Lois Lane. You are what you eat. You are also the comics you peruse as a child.

At home, my father made me read Mexican history, study Mexican geography and understand the names, the dreams and defeats of Mexico: a non-existent country, I then thought, invented by my father in order to nourish my infant imagination with yet another marvelous fiction: a land of Oz with a green cactus road, a landscape and a soul so different from those of the United States that they appeared as a fantasy.

A cruel fantasy: the history of Mexico was a history of crushing defeats, whereas I lived in a world, that of my D.C. public

school, which celebrated victories, one victory after another, from Yorktown to New Orleans to Chapultepec to Appomattox to San Juan Hill to Beaulieu Wood: had this nation never known defeat? Sometimes, the names of your victories were the same as the names of Mexico's defeats and humiliations: Veracruz. Pershing. Indeed: from the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli. In the map of my imagination, as the United States expanded westward, Mexico contracted southward. Miguel Hidalgo, the Father of Mexican independence, ended with his head exhibited on a lance at the city gates of Chihuahua. Imagine George and Martha beheaded at Mount Vernon.

To the south, sad songs, sweet nostalgia, impossible desires. To the north, self-confidence, faith in progress, boundless optimism. Mexico, the imaginary country, dreamt of a painful past; the United States, the real country, dreamt of a happy future.

The French equate intelligence with rational discourse, the Russians with intense soul-searching. For a Mexican, intelligence is inseparable from maliciousness—in this, as in many other things, we are quite Italian: *furberia*, roguish slyness, and the cult of appearances, *la bella figura*, are Italianate traits present everywhere in Latin America: Rome, more than Madrid, is our spiritual capital in this sense.

For me, as a child, the United States appeared as a world where intelligence was equated with energy, zest, enthusiasm. The North American world blinds us with its energy; we cannot see ourselves, we must see *you*. The United States is a world full of cheerleaders, prize-giving, singin' in the rain: the baton-twirler, the Oscar awards, the musical comedies cannot be repeated elsewhere; in Mexico the Hollywood statuette would come dipped in poisoned paint; in France Gene Kelly would constantly stop in his steps to reflect: *Je danse, donc je suis*.

Many things impressed themselves on me during those vibrant years of the New Deal. The United States — would you believe it? — was a country where things worked, where nothing ever

broke down: trains, plumbing, roads, punctuality, personal security seemed to function perfectly, at least at the eye level of a young Mexican diplomat's son living in a residential hotel on Washington's 16th Street, facing Meridian Hill Park, where nobody was then mugged and where our superb furnished seven-room apartment cost us one hundred and ten pre-inflation dollars a month. Yes, in spite of all the problems, the livin' seemed easy during those long Tidewater summers when I became, perhaps, the first and only Mexican to prefer grits to guacamole. I also became the original Mexican Calvinist: an invisible taskmaster called Puritanical Duty shadows my every footstep: I shall not deserve anything unless I work relentlessly for it, with iron discipline, day after day. Sloth is sin, and if I do not sit at my typewriter every day at 8 A.M. for a working day of seven to eight hours, I will surely go to hell. No *siestas* for me, alas and alack and *hélas* and *ayayay*: how I came to envy my Latin brethren, unburdened by the Protestant work ethic, and why must I, to this very day, read Hermann Broch and scribble on my black notebook on a sunny Mexican beach, instead of lolling the day away and waiting for the coconuts to fall?

But the United States in the thirties went far beyond my personal experience. The nation that de Tocqueville had destined to share dominance over half the world realized that, in effect, only a continental state could be a modern state; in the thirties, the U.S.A. had to decide *what to do* with its new, world-wide power, and Franklin Roosevelt taught us to believe that the first thing was for the United States to show that it was capable of living up to its ideals. I learnt then — my first political lesson — that this is your true greatness, not, as was to be the norm in my lifetime, material wealth, not arrogant power misused against weaker peoples, not ignorant ethnocentrism burning itself out in contempt for others.

As a young Mexican growing up in your country, my primary impression was that of a nation of boundless energy, imagination, and the will to confront and solve the great social issues of the

times without blinking or looking for scapegoats. It was the impression of a country identified with its own highest principles: political democracy, economic well-being and faith in its human resources, especially in that most precious of all capitals, the renewable wealth of education and research.

Franklin Roosevelt, then, restored America's self-respect in this essential way, not by macho posturing. I saw the United States in the thirties lift itself by the bootstraps from the dead dust of Oklahoma and the gray lines of the unemployed in Detroit, much as a convalescent football player springs back to the field of his greatest triumphs; and this image of health was reflected in my daily life, in my reading of Mark Twain, in the images of movies and newspapers, in the North American capacity for mixing fluffy illusion and hard-bitten truth, self-celebration and self-criticism: the madcap heiresses played by Carole Lombard coexisted with the Walker Evans photographs of hungry, old-at-thirty migratory mothers, and the nimble tread of the feet of Fred Astaire did not silence the heavy stomp of the boots of Tom Joad.

My school — a public school, non-confessional, co-educational, and racially integrated — reflected these realities and their basically egalitarian thrust. I believed in the democratic simplicity of my teachers and chums, and above all I believed I was, naturally, in a totally unself-conscious way, a part of that world. It is important, at all ages and in all occupations, to be “popular” in the United States; I have known no other society where the values of “regularity” are so highly prized. I was popular, I was “regular.” Until a day in March — March the eighteenth, 1938.

On that day, a man from another world, the imaginary country of my childhood, the President of Mexico, Lizaro Cirdenas, nationalized the holdings of foreign oil companies. The headlines in the North American press denounced the “communist” government of Mexico and its “red” president; they demanded the invasion of Mexico in the sacred name of private property, and Mexicans, under international boycott, were invited to drink their oil.

Instantly, surprisingly, I became a pariah in my school. Cold shoulders, aggressive stares, epithets, and sometimes blows. Children know how to be cruel, and the cruelty of their elders is the surest residue of the malaise the young feel towards things strange, things other, things that reveal our own ignorance or insufficiency. This was not reserved for me or for Mexico: at about the same time, an extremely brilliant boy of eleven arrived from Germany. He was a Jew and his family had fled from the Nazis. I shall always remember his face, dark and trembling, his aquiline nose and deep-set, bright eyes surrounded by sadness; the sensitivity of his hands and the strangeness of it all to his American companions. This young man, Hans Berliner, was a brilliant mathematical mind and he walked and saluted like a Central European, he wore short pants and high woven stockings, Tyrolean jackets and an air of displaced courtesy that infuriated the popular, regular, feisty, knickered, provincial, depression-era little sons-of-bitches at Henry Cooke Public School on 13th Street, N.W.

The shock of alienation and the shock of recognition are sometimes one and the same. What was different made others afraid, less of what was different than of themselves, of their own incapacity to recognize themselves in the alien.

I discovered that my father's country was real. And that I belonged to it. Mexico was my identity yet I lacked it; Hans Berliner suffered more than I — headlines from Mexico are soon forgotten; another great issue becomes all-important for a wonderful ten days' media feast — yet he owned his identity as a Central European Jew. I do not know what became of him. Over the years, I have always expected to see him receive a Nobel Prize in one of the sciences. Surely, if he lived, he integrated himself into North American society. I had to look at the photographs of President Cirdenas: he was a man of another lineage; he did not appear in the repertory of glossy, seductive images of the saleable North American world. He was a mestizo, Spanish and Indian, with a

faraway, green and liquid look in his eyes, as if he were trying to remember a mute and ancient past.

Was that past mine as well? Could I dream the dreams of the country suddenly revealed in a political act as something more than a demarcation of frontiers on a map or a little hill of statistics in a yearbook? I believe I then had the intuition that I would not rest until I revealed to myself that common destiny which depended upon yet another community: the community of times. The United States had made me believe that we live only for the future; Mexico, Cárdenas, the events of 1938, made me understand that only in an act of the present can we make present the past as well as the future: to be a Mexican was to identify a hunger for being, a desire for dignity rooted in many forgotten centuries and in many centuries yet to come, but rooted here, now, in the instant, in the vigilant time of Mexico I later learned to understand in the stone serpents of Teotihuacan and in the polychrome angels of Oaxaca.

Of course, as happens in childhood, all these deep musings had no proof of existence outside an act that was, more than a prank, a form of affirmation. In 1937, my father took me to see a film at the old RKO Keith in Washington. It was called *Man of Conquest* and it starred Richard Dix as Sam Houston. When Dix/Houston proclaimed the secession of the Republic of Texas from Mexico, I jumped on the theater seat and proclaimed on my own and from the full height of my nationalist ten years, "Viva Mexico! Death to the Gringos!"

My embarrassed father hauled me out of the theater, but then his pride in me did not resist a leak about my first rebellious act to the *Washington Star*. So that I appeared for the first time in a newspaper and became a child celebrity for the acknowledged ten-day span. I read Andy Warhol *avant l'air-brush*: Everyone shall be famous for at least five minutes.

In the wake of my father's diplomatic career I travelled to Chile and fully entered the universe of the Spanish language, of

Latin American politics and its adversities. President Roosevelt had resisted tremendous pressures to apply sanctions and even invade Mexico by force to punish my country for recovering its own wealth. Likewise, he did not seek to destabilize the Chilean radicals, communists and socialists democratically elected to power in Chile under the banners of the Popular Front.

In the early forties, the vigour of Chile's political life was contagious: active unions, active parties, electoral campaigns all spoke of the political health of this, the most democratic of Latin American nations. Chile was a politically verbalized country. It was no coincidence that it was also the country of the great Spanish-American poets, Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, Pablo Neruda.

I only came to know Neruda and became his friend many years later. This King Midas of poetry would write, in his literary testament rescued from a gutted house and a nameless tomb, a beautiful song to the Spanish language: the conquistadores, he said, took our gold, but they left us their gold: they left us our words.

Neruda's gold, I learnt in Chile, was the property of all. One afternoon on the beach at Lota in Southern Chile I saw the miners as they came out, mole-like, from their hard work many feet under the sea, extracting the coal of the Pacific Ocean. They sat around a bonfire and sang, with a guitar, a poem from Neruda's *Canto General*. I told them that the author would be thrilled to know that his poem had been set to music.

What author?, they asked me in surprise.

For them, Neruda's poetry had no author, it came from afar, it had always been sung, like Homer's. It was the poetry, as Croce said of the *Iliad*, "d'un popolo intero poetante," of an entire poetizing people. It was the document of the original identity between poetry and history.

I learnt in Chile that Spanish could be the language of free men. I was also to learn in my lifetime, precisely in Chile, the fragility of both our language and our freedom when Richard Nixon, unable to destroy American democracy, destroyed Chilean

democracy and sent forth Henry Kissinger to do in Chile what Leonid Brezhnev had done in Czechoslovakia.

An anonymous language, a language that belongs to us all, as Neruda's poem belonged to those miners on the beach, yet a language that can be kidnapped, impoverished, sometimes jailed, sometimes murdered. Let me summarize this paradox: Chile offered me and the other writers of my generation in Santiago both the essential fragility of a cornered language, Spanish, and the protection of the Latin of our times, the *lingua franca* of the modern world, the English language. At The Grange School under the awesome beauty of the Andes, Jose Donoso and Jorge Edwards, Roberto Torreti, the late Luis Alberto Heyremans and myself, by then all budding amateurs, wrote our first exercises in literature within this mini-Britannia. We all ran strenuous cross-country races, got caned from time to time and recuperated reading Swinburne; and we received huge doses of rugby, Ruskin, porridge for breakfast, and stiff-upper-lipped reception of military defeats. But when Montgomery broke through at Alamein, the assembled school tossed caps in the air and hip-hup hurraed to death. In South America, clubs were named after George Canning and football teams after Lord Cochrane; no matter that English help to win independence led to English economic imperialism from oil in Mexico to railways in Argentina. There was a secret thrill in our hearts: our Spanish conquerors had been beaten by the English; the defeat of Philip II's invincible Armada compensated for the crimes of Cortés, Pizarro, and Valdivia. If Britain was an empire, at least she was a democratic one.

And here lay, for my generation, the central contradiction of our relationship with the English-speaking world: you have universalized the values of modernity, freedom, economic development, and political democracy; but when in Latin America we move, in our own way, according to our own cultural tradition, to achieve them, your governments brand us as "Marxist-Leninist" tools, side with the military protectors of a status quo dating back

from the Spanish Conquest, attribute the dynamics of change to a Soviet conspiracy, and finally corrupt the movement towards modernity that you yourselves have fostered.

All of this can be debated in English; it can only be created in Spanish. Rhetoric, said William Butler Yeats, is the language of our fight with others; poetry is the name of our fight with ourselves. My passage from English to Spanish decided the concrete expression of what, before, in Washington, had been the revelation of an identity. I wanted to write and I wanted to write in order to show myself that my identity and my country were real: now, in Chile, as I started to scribble my first stories and even publish them in school magazines, I learnt that I should write precisely in Spanish.

After all, the English language did not need one more writer. (I have said many times that the English language has always been alive and kicking and, if it becomes drowsy, there will always be an Irishman . . .)

In Chile I knew the possibilities of our language to give wings to freedom and poetry; the impression was enduring, it links me forever to that sad and wonderful land, it still inhabits me and it transformed me into a man who only knows how to dream, love, insult and write in Spanish. It also left me wide open to an incessant interrogation: What happened to this universal language, Spanish, which after the seventeenth century ceased to be a language of life, creation, dissatisfaction, and personal powers and became once too often a language of mourning, sterility, rhetorical applause, and abstract power? Where were the threads of my tradition, where could I, writing in the mid-twentieth century in Latin America, find the direct link to the great living presences I was then starting to read, my lost Cervantes, my old Quevedo, dead because he could not tolerate one more writer, my Góngora, abandoned in a gulf of loneliness?

At sixteen I finally went to live permanently in Mexico and found the answers to my quest for identity and language there,

written in the thin air of a plateau of stone and dust that is the negative Indian image of another highland, that of Central Spain.

But between Santiago and Mexico City, I spent six wonderful months in Argentina. They were, in spite of their brevity, so important in this reading and writing of myself that I must give them their full worth: Buenos Aires was then, as always, the most beautiful, sophisticated and civilized city in Latin America, but in the summer of 'forty-four, as street pavements melted under the heat and the city smelt of cheap wartime gasoline, raw hides emanating from the port, and chocolate *éclair*s emanating from the *confiterías*, Argentina had seen a succession of military coups: General Rawson had overthrown President Castillo of the cattle oligarchy, but General Ramirez had then overthrown Rawson and now General Farrel had overthrown Ramirez: A young colonel called Juan Domingo Perón was General Farrel's up-and-coming Minister of Labor and I heard an actress called Eva Duarte interpret the roles of "great women in history" on Radio Belgrano. A stultifying hack novelist using the pen name "Hugo Wast" was assigned the Ministry of Education under his real name of Martínez Zuviria and brought all of his anti-Semitic, un-democratic and pro-fascist phobias to the Buenos Aires high school system, which I had suddenly been plunked into. Coming from the America of the New Deal, the ideal of revolutionary Mexico, and the politics of the Popular Front in Chile, I could not stomach this, rebelled and was granted a full summer of wandering around Buenos Aires, free for the first time in my life, following my preferred tango orchestras — Canaro, D'Arienzo, and Anibal Troilo, alias "Pichuco" — as they played all summer long in the Renoir-like shades and lights of the rivers and pavilions of El Tigre and Maldonado. Now, the comics were in Spanish: Mutt and Jeff were Benitín y Eneas. But Argentina had its own comic-book imperialism: through Billiken and Patorozú, all the children of Latin America knew from the crib that "Las Malvinas son Argentinas."

Two very important things happened. First, I lost my virginity. We lived in this apartment building on the leafy corner of Callao and Quintana, and after 10 A.M. nobody was left there except myself, an old and deaf Polish doorkeeper, and a beautiful Czech woman, age thirty, whose husband produced films. I went up to ask her for her *Sintonía*, which was the Radio Guide of the forties, because I wanted to know when Evita was doing the life of Joan of Arc. She said that had already passed, but that the next program was the life of Madame du Barry. I wondered if Madame du Barry's life was as interesting as Joan of Arc's. She said it was certainly less saintly and, besides, it could be emulated. How?, I said innocently. The rest was my beautiful apprenticeship. We made each other very happy. And also very sad: this was not the liberty of love, but rather its libertine variety: we loved in hiding. I was too young to be a real sadist. So it had to end.

The other important thing was that I started reading Argentine literature, right from the gaucho poems to Sarmiento's *Memories of Provincial Life* to Cane's *Juvenilia* to Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra* to . . . to . . . to (this was as good as discovering that Joan of Arc was also sexy) to: Borges. I have never wanted to meet Borges personally because he belongs only to that summer in B.A. He belongs to my personal discovery of Latin American literature.

II

Extremes of Latin America: if Cuba is the Andalusia of the New World, the Mexican plateau is its Castilla: parched and brown, inhabited by suspicious cats burnt too many times by foreign invasions, Mexico is the sacred zone of a secret hope: the Gods shall return.

Mexican space is closed, jealous and self-contained. In contrast, Argentinian space is open and dependent on the foreign: migrations, exports, imports, words. Mexican space was vertically

sacralized thousands of years ago. Argentinian space patiently awaits its horizontal profanation.

I arrived at the Mexican highland from the Argentinian pampa when I was sixteen years old. As I said, it was better to study in a country where the minister of education was Jaime Torres Bodet than in a country where he was “Hugo Wast.” This was not the only contrast, nor the most important one. A land isolated by its very nature—desert, mountain, chasm, sea, jungle, fire, ice, fugitive mists, and a sun that never blinks—Mexico is a multi-levelled temple that rises abruptly, blind to horizons, an arrow that wounds the sky but refuses the dangerous frontiers of the land, the canyons, the sierras without a human footprint, whereas the pampa is nothing if not an eternal frontier, the very portrait of the horizon, the sprawling flatland of a latent expansion awaiting, like a passive lover, the vast and rich overflow from that concentration of the transitory represented by the commercial metropolis of Buenos Aires, what Ezequiel Martínez Estrada called Goliath’s head on David’s body.

Mexicans descend from the Aztecs.

Argentinians descend from ships.

It is important to appreciate this distinction in order to understand the verbal differences between the Mexican culture, which, long before Paul Valéry, knew itself to be mortal, and the Argentinian culture, founded on the optimism of powerful migratory currents from Europe, innocent of sacred stones or aboriginal promises.

Mexico, closed to immigration by the TTT — that is, the Tremendous Texas Trauma that from 1836 cured us once and for all of the temptation of receiving Caucasian colonists because they had airport names like Houston and Austin and Dallas — devoted its populations to breed like rabbits: blessed by the pope, Coatlicue and Jorge Negrete, we are, all seventy million of us, Catholics in the Virgin Mary, misogynists in the stone goddesses, and *machistas* in the singing, pistol-packing, *charro*.

The pampa goes on waiting: twenty-five million Argentinians today, hardly five million more than in 1945, half of them in Buenos Aires.

Language in Mexico is ancient, old as the oldest dead. The eagles of the Indian empire fell and it suffices to read the poems of the defeated to understand the vein of sadness that runs through Mexican literature, the feeling that words are identical to farewells:

“Where shall we go to now, oh my friends?” asks the Aztec poet of the Fall of Tenochtitlan: “The smoke lifts; the fog extends. Cry, my friends. Cry, oh cry.” And the contemporary poet Xavier Villaurrutia, four centuries later, again sings from the very bed of the same, but now dried-up lake, and its dry stones:

In the midst of a silence deserted as a street before the crime
 Without even breathing so that nothing may disturb my death
 In this wall-less solitude
 When the angels fled
 In the grave of my bed I leave my bloodless statue.

A sad, underground language, forever being lost and recovered; I soon learnt that Spanish as spoken in Mexico answered to six unwritten rules:

First. Never say the familiar *tu* — thou — if you can use the formal you — *usted*.

Second. Never use the possessive pronoun in the first person, but rather in the second person, as in “This is *your* home.”

Third. Always use the first person singular to refer to your own troubles, as in “Me fue del carajo, mano.” But use the first-person plural when you refer to your successes, as in “During our term, we distributed three million acres.”

Fourth. Never use one diminutive if you can use five in a row.

Fifth. Never use the imperative when you can use the subjunctive.

Sixth. And only then, when you have exhausted these ceremonies of communication, bring out your verbal knife and plunge it deep into the other's heart: "Chinga a tu madre, cabrón."

The language of Mexicans is born from abysmal extremes of power and impotence, domination and resentment: it is the mirror of an overabundance of history, a history that devours itself before burning itself and then re-generating itself, phoenix-like, once more.

Argentina, on the contrary, is a *tabula rasa* and it demands a passionate verbalization. I do not know another country that so fervently — with the fervor of Buenos Aires, Borges would say — opposes the silence of its infinite space, its physical and mental pampa, demanding: please, *verbalize* me!

Martin Fierro, Carlos Gardel, Jorge Luis Borges: reality must be captured, desperately, in the verbal web of the gaucho poem, the sentimental tango or the metaphysical tale: the pampa of the gaucho becomes the garden of the tango becomes the forked paths of literature.

What is forked? What is said.

What is said? What is forked.

Everything: Space. Time. Language. History. Our history. The history of Spanish America.

I read *Ficciones* as I flew north on a pontoon plane courtesy of Pan American Airways. It was wartime, we had to have priority; all cameras were banned and glazed plastic screens were put on our windows several minutes before we landed. Since I was not an Axis spy I read Borges as we splashed into Santos, saying that the best proof that the Koran is an Arab book is that not a single camel is mentioned in its pages. I started thinking that the best proof that Borges is an Argentinian is in everything that he has to evoke because it isn't there, as we glided into an invisible Rio de Janeiro. And as we flew out of Bahía, I thought that Borges invents a world because he needs it. I need, therefore I imagine.

By the time we landed in Trinidad, the reading of “Funes the Memorious” and “Pierre Ménard, Author of *Don Quixote*” had introduced me, without my knowledge, to the genealogy of the serene madmen, the children of Erasmus. I did not know then that this was the most illustrious family of modern fiction, since it went, backwards, from Pierre Ménard to Don Quixote himself. During two short lulls in Santo Domingo (then, horrifyingly, called Ciudad Trujillo) and Port-au-Prince, I had been prepared in Borges to encounter my wonderful friends Toby Shandy, who reconstructs in his miniature cabbage patch the battlefields of Flanders he can no longer live in history; Jane Austen’s Catherine Moreland and Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, who like Don Quixote believe in what they read; Dickens’ Mr. Micawber, who takes his hopes to be realities; Dostoevsky’s Myshkin, an idiot because he gives the benefit of the doubt to the good possibility of mankind; Perez Galdos’ Nazarin, who is mad because he believes that each human being can be a daily Christ and is truly Saint Paul’s madman:

Let him who seems wise among you become mad,
so that he might truly become wise.

On landing at Miami Airport the glazed windows disappeared once and for all and I knew that like Pierre Ménard a writer must always face the mysterious duty of literally reconstructing a spontaneous work. And so I met my tradition: *Don Quixote* was a book waiting to be written. The history of Latin America was a history waiting to be lived.

III

When I finally arrived in Mexico, I discovered that my father’s imaginary country was real, but more fantastic than any imaginary land. It was as real as its physical and spiritual borders: Mexico, the only frontier between the industrialized and the developing

worlds; the frontier between my country and the United States but also between all of Latin America and the United States, as between the Mediterranean and the Anglo-Saxon strains in the New World, between the thrift of Protestantism and the prodigality of Catholicism, between the horizontal and extensive decentralization of power and its absolutist, pyramidal, and centralized structure, between customary, unwritten law and the Roman law tradition, where nothing exists unless it is written down.

You are the children of the heretic Pelagius, who believed in direct grace between God and Man; we, of the orthodox Saint Augustine who believed that grace is achieved only through the mediation of hierarchy. You are founded on the parsimony of capitalism. We are founded on an autocratic and populist dispensation. You peer at your ledgers through the spectacles of Ben Franklin. We spend our wealth on altars and rockets, like Philip II. Your art has the nameless simplicity of a New England church; ours has the baroque abundance of gold leaf in a flea-bitten village. You represent the poverty of wealth; we the wealth of poverty.

You want to live better. We want to die better. You feel that you must redeem the future. We are convinced that we must redeem the past. Your past is assimilated; at times, one would fear, it is even forgotten. Ours is still battling for our souls. You are accustomed to success; we, to failure. Or, rather, your failures drive you to a self-flagellating malaise of incomprehension. Mexico measures its successes with the tragic misgivings of experience; all things in life are limited and fleeting, especially success.

Some day North Americans shall ask themselves how to transform Pocahontas into the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Mexicans shall ask themselves, can you transform Moctezuma into a member of the Kennedy dynasty? How can you make a ritual out of eating a hamburger? Can you sell *mole poblano* by computer?

How to say, in Spanish, "To be or not to be?," when in English we cannot distinguish our *ser* from our *estar*?

It was with this experience and these questions that I approached the body of gold and mud of Mexico, the imaginary, imagined country, finally real but only real if I saw it from a distance which would assure me, thanks to the fact of separation, that my desire for reunion with it would be forever urgent and only real if I wrote it. Thanks to perspective I was, finally, able to write a few novels where I could speak of the scars of revolution, the nightmares of progress, and the perseverance of dreams.

I wrote urgently because my absence became a destiny, yet a shared destiny: that of my own body as a young man, that of the old body of my country and that of the problematic and insomniac body of my language.

I could, perhaps, identify the former without too much trouble: Mexico and myself. But the language belonged to us all, to the vast community that writes and talks and thinks in Spanish. And without this language I could give no reality to either myself or my land. Language thus became the center of my personal being and of my possibility of transforming my own destiny and that of my country into a shared destiny.

But nothing is shared in the abstract. Like bread and love, language and ideas are shared with human beings.

My first contact with literature was sitting on the knees of Alfonso Reyes when the Mexican writer was Ambassador to Brazil in the earlier thirties. Reyes had brought the Spanish classics back to life for us; he had written the most superb books on Greece; he was the most lucid of literary theoreticians; in fact, he had translated all of Western culture into Latin American terms. In the late forties, he was living in a little house the color of the *mamey* fruit in Cuernavaca. He would invite me to spend weekends with him and since I was eighteen and a night-prowler I only accompanied him from eleven in the morning, when don Alfonso would sit in a cafe and throw verbal flowers at the girls strolling around the plaza that was then a garden of laurels and not, as it has become, of cement; I do not know if the square, ruddy man

seated at the next table was a British consul crushed by the vicinity of the volcano; but if Reyes, enjoying the spectacle of the world, would quote Lope de Vega and Garcilaso, our neighbour the *mescal* drinker would answer, without looking at us, with the more somber *stanze* of Marlowe and John Donne. Then we would go to the movies in order, Reyes said, to take a bath in contemporary epic, and only at night would he start scolding me, how come you have not read Stendhal yet?, the world didn't start five minutes ago, you know.

He could irritate me; I read, against his classical tastes, the most modern, the most strident books, without understanding that I was learning his lesson: there is no creation without tradition, the "new" is an inflection on a preceding form, novelty is always a work on the past.

Borges said of him that Reyes wrote the best Spanish prose of our times. He taught me that culture had a smile; that the intellectual tradition of the whole world was ours by birthright and that Mexican literature was important because it was literature, not because it was Mexican.

One day I got up very early (or maybe I came in very late from a binge) and saw him seated at five in the morning, working at his table, surrounded by the renewed aromas of the jacaranda and the bougainvillea. He was a diminutive Buddha, bald and pink, almost one of those elves who cobble shoes at night while the family sleeps. He liked to quote Goethe: Write at dawn, skim the cream of the day, then you can study crystals, intrigue at court, and make love to your kitchen-maid. Writing in silence, Reyes did not smile: his world, in a way, ended on a funeral day in February 1913, when his insurrected father, General Bernardo Reyes, fell riddled by machine gun bullets in the Zocalo in Mexico City and with him fell whatever was left of Mexico's Belle Epoque, the long and cruel peace of Porfirio Díaz.

The smile of Alfonso Reyes had ashes in its lips. He had written, as a response to history, the great poem of exile and dis-

tance from Mexico: the poem of a cruel Iphigenia, the Mexican Iphigenia of the valley of Anáhuac:

I was another, being myself;
 I was he who wanted to leave.
 To return is to cry. I do not repent of this wide world.
 It is not I who return,
 But my shackled feet.

My father had remained in Buenos Aires as Mexican *chargé d'affaires*, with instructions to frown at Argentina's sympathies towards the Axis. My mother profited from his absence by enrolling me in a Catholic school in Mexico City. The brothers who ruled this institution were extremely preoccupied with something that had never entered my head: s-i-n, *Sin*. On the inauguration of the school year, one of the brothers would appear before the class with a white lily in his hand and say: "This is a Catholic youth before kissing a girl." Then he would throw the flower on the floor, dance a little jig on it, pick up the bedraggled vegetable, and confirm our worst suspicions: "This is a Catholic boy after . . ."

Well, all of this made life very tempting and, retrospectively, I would agree with Luis Buñuel when he says that sex without sin is like an egg without salt. The priests at the Colegio Francés made sex irresistible for us; they also made leftists of us by their constant denunciation of Mexican liberalism and, especially, of Benito Juárez. The sexual and political temptations became very great in a city where provincial mores and sharp social distinction made it extremely difficult to have normal sexual relationships with young or even older women.

All this led, as I say, to a posture of rebellion that for me crystallized in the decision to be a writer. My father, by then back from Argentina, sternly said, OK, then go out and be a writer, but not at my expense. I became a very young journalist in the weekly *Siempre*, but my family pressured me to enter law school, or, in the desert of Mexican literature, I would literally die of

hunger and thirst. Again, I was sent to visit Alfonso Reyes in his enormous library-house, where he seemed more diminutive than ever, ensconced in a tiny corner he saved for his bed among the Piranesi-like perspective of the volumes piled upon volumes, and he said to me: "Mexico is a very formalistic country. If you don't have a title, you are nobody: *nadie, ninguno*. A title is like the handle on a cup; without it, no one will pick you up. You must become a *licenciado*, a lawyer; then you can do whatever you please, like I did."

So I entered the School of Law at the National University, where, as I feared, learning tended to be by rote. The budding explosion in the student population was compounded by cynical teachers who would spend the whole hour of class passing list on the two hundred students of Civil Law, from Aguilar to Zapata. But there were great exceptions of true teachers who understood that the Law was inseparable from a culture, from morality, and from justice. Foremost among these were the exiles from the defeat of Republican Spain who had enormously enriched Mexican universities, publishing houses, the arts, and the sciences. Don Manuel Pedroso, former dean of the University of Seville, made the study of Law compatible with my literary inclinations. When I would bitterly complain about the dryness and boredom of learning the penal or mercantile codes by heart, he would counter by saying: "Forget the codes. Read Dostoevsky, read Balzac. There's all you have to know about criminal or commercial law." He also made me understand that Stendhal was right when he said that the best model for a well-structured novel is the Napoleonic Code of Civil Law. Anyway, I found that culture is made of connections, not of separations: to specialize is to isolate.

Sex was another story, but Mexico City was then a manageable town of one million people, beautiful in its extremes of colonial and nineteenth-century elegance and the garishness of its exuberant and dangerous nightlife. My friends and I spent away the last years of our adolescence and the first of our manhood in a succes-

sion of cantinas, brothels, strip-joints and silver-painted nightclubs where the bolero was sung and the mambo danced; whores, mariachis, magicians, were our constant companions as we struggled through our first readings of D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley, James Joyce and André Gide, T. S. Eliot and Thomas Mann. Salvador Elizondo and I were the two would-be writers of the group, and if the realistic grain of *La región más transparente* was sown in this our rather somnambulistic immersion in the spectral nightlife of Mexico City, it is also true that the cruel imagination of an instant in Elizondo's *Farabeuf* had the same background experience. We would go to a whorehouse strangely called El Buen Tono, choose a poor Mexican girl who usually said her name was Gladys and she came from Guadalajara and go to our respective rooms. A horrible scream would then be heard and Gladys from Guadalajara would rush out, crying and streaming blood. Elizondo, in the culmination of love, had slashed her armpit with a razor.

Another perspective, another distance for approximation, another possibility of sharing a language. In 1950 I went to Europe to do graduate work in international law at the University in Geneva. Octavio Paz had just published two books that had changed the face of Mexican literature, *Libertad bajo palabra* and *El laberinto de la soledad*. My friends and I had read those books out loud in Mexico, dazzled by a poetics that managed, simultaneously, to renew our language from within and then connect it to the language of the world.¹

At age thirty-six, Octavio Paz was not very different from what he is today. Writers born in 1914, like Paz and Julio Cortázar, surely signed a Faustian pact at the very mouth of hell's trenches; so many poets died in that war that someone had to take their place. I remember Paz in the so-called existentialist nightclubs of the time in Paris, in discussion with the very animated and handsome Albert Camus, who alternated philosophy and the boogie-woogie in La Rose Rouge; I remember Paz in front of the

large windows of a gallery on the Place Vendôme, reflecting Max Ernst's great postwar painting, "Europe after the rain" and the painter's profile as an ancient eagle, and I tell myself that the poetics of Paz is an art of civilizations, a movement of encounters: Paz the poet meets Paz the thinker, because his poetry is a form of thought and his thought is a form of poetry; and thanks to this meeting, the encounter of different civilizations takes place: Paz introduces civilizations to one another, makes them presentable before it is too late, because behind the wonderful smile of Camus, fixed forever in the absurdity of death, behind the bright erosion of painting by Max Ernst and the crystals of the Place Vendôme, Octavio and I, when we met, could hear the voice of *el poeta Libra*, Ezra, lamenting the death of the best, "for an old bitch gone in the teeth, for a botched civilization."

Octavio Paz has offered civilizations the mirror of their mortality, as Paul Valéry did, but also the reflection of their arrival in an epidemic of meetings and erotic risks. In the generous friendship of Octavio Paz I learnt that there were no privileged centers of culture, race, or politics; that nothing should be left out of literature because our time is a time of deadly reduction. The essential orphanhood of our time is seen by the poetry and thought of Paz as a challenge to be met through the renewed flux of human knowledge, of *all* human knowledge. We have not finished thinking, imagining, acting. It is still possible to know the world; we are unfinished men and women.

I am not at the crossroads;
to choose is to err

...

I am in a cage hanging from time. . .

For my generation in Mexico the problem did not consist in discovering our modernity, but in discovering our tradition. The latter was brutally denied by the comatose, petrified teaching of the classics in Mexican high schools: one had to bring Cervantes

back to life in spite of a school system fatally oriented towards the idea of universities as sausage factories. It was also denied by the more grotesque forms of Mexican nationalism at the time. A Marxist teacher once told me it was un-Mexican to read Kafka; a fascist critic said the same thing (this has been Kafka's Kafkian destiny everywhere, you know), and a rather sterile Mexican author gave a pompous lecture at the Bellas Artes warning that readers who read Proust would prostitute themselves.

To be a writer in Mexico in the fifties you had to be with Reyes and with Paz in the assertion that Mexico was not an isolated, virginal province, but very much a part of the human race and its cultural tradition; that we were all, for good or for evil, contemporary to all men and women.

In Geneva I regained my perspective. I rented a garret overlooking the beautiful old square of the Bourg-du-Four, founded by Julius Caesar as the Forum Boarium two millennia ago. The square was filled with coffeehouses and old bookstores. The girls came from all over the world, they were beautiful and they were independent. When they were kissed, one did not become a sullied lily. We had salt on our lips. We loved one another and I also loved going to the little island where the lake meets the river to spend long hours reading. Since it was called the Jean Jacques Rousseau Island, I took along my volume of the *Confessions*. Many things came together then. A novel was the transformation of experience into history. The modern epic had been the epic of the first-person singular, of the I, from St. Augustine to Abelard to Dante to Rousseau to Stendhal to Proust. Joyce de-voiced fiction: Here Comes Everybody! But H. C. E. did not collectively save the degraded Ego from exhaustion, self-doubt and, finally, self-forgetfulness. When Odysseus sees he is inexistent, we know and he knows that he is disguised; when Beckett's characters proclaim their non-being, we know that "the fact is notorious": they are no longer disguised. Kafka's man has been forgotten; no one can remember K the land surveyor; finally, as Milan

Kundera tells us, nobody can remember Prague, Czechoslovakia, History.

I did not yet know this as I spent many reading hours on the little island of Rousseau on the intersection of Lake Geneva and the Rhône River back in 1951. But I obscurely felt that there was something beyond the exploration of the self that actually made the idea of human personality possible if the paths beyond it were explored. Cervantes taught us that book is a book is a book: Don Quixote does not invite us into “reality,” but into an act of the imagination where all things are real: the characters are active psychological entities, but also the archetypes they announce and always the figures from whence they came and that were unimaginable, un-thinkable, as Don Quixote, before they became characters first and archetypes later.

Could I, a Mexican who had not yet written his first book, sitting on a bench on an early spring’s day, as the *bisse* from the Jura Mountains quieted down, have the courage to explore for myself, with my language, with my tradition, with my friends and influences, that region where the figure bids us consider it in the insecurity of its gestation? Cervantes did it in a precise cultural situation: he inaugurated the modern world by making Don Quixote leave the village of his security (but a village whose name has been, let us remember, forgotten) and take to the roads of the unsheltered, the unknown and the different, there to lose what he read, and to gain what we, the readers, read in him.

The novel is forever travelling Don Quixote’s road, from the security of the analogous to the adventure of the different and, even, the unknown. In my way, this is the road I wanted to travel. I read Rousseau, or the adventures of the I; Joyce and Faulkner, or the adventures of the We; Cervantes, or the adventures of the You he calls the Idle, the Amiable Reader: you. And I read, in a shower of fire and in the lightning of enthusiasm, Rimbaud. His mother asked him what this poem was about. And he answered: “I have wanted to say what it says there, literally and in all other senses.”

This statement by Rimbaud has always been a demanding rule for me and for what we are all writing today; and the present-day vigor in the literature of the Hispanic world, to which I belong, is not alien to this Rimbaudian approach to writing: Say what you mean, literally and in all other senses.

I think I imagined in Switzerland what I would try to write some day but would first have to pay my apprenticeship and only be able to write what I then imagined after many years, when I not only knew that I had the tools with which to do it, but also, and equally important, when I knew that if I did not write, death would not write it for me. You start by writing to live. You end by writing not to die. Love is the actual marriage of this desire and of this fear. The women I have loved I have desired for themselves, but also because I feared myself.

IV

My first European experience came to a climax in the summer of 1950. It was a hot and calm evening on Lake Zurich and some wealthy Mexican friends had invited me to dinner at the elegant Bar-au-Lac Hotel. The summer restaurant was a floating terrace on the lake. You reached it by a gangplank and it was lighted by paper lanterns and flickering candles. As I unfolded my stiff white napkin among the soothing tinkle of silver and glass, I raised my eyes and saw the group dining at the next table.

Three ladies sat there with a man in his seventies. This man was stiff and elegant, dressed in double-breasted white serge and immaculate shirt and tie. His long, delicate fingers sliced a cold pheasant, almost, with daintiness. Yet even in eating he seemed to me seemingly unbending, with a ramrod-backed, military sort of bearing. The age of his face showed "a growing fatigue," but the pride with which his lips and his jaws were set tried desperately to hide the fact, while the eyes twinkled with "the fiery play of fancy."

As the carnival lights of that summer's night in Zurich played with a fire of their own on the features I now recognized, Thomas Mann's face was a theater of implicit, quiet emotions. He ate and let the ladies do the talking; he was, in my fascinated eyes, a meeting place where solitude gives birth to beauty unfamiliar and perilous, but also to the perverse and the illicit. Thomas Mann had managed, out of this solitude, to find the affinity "between the personal destiny of [the] author and that of his contemporaries in general." Through him, I had imagined that the products of this solitude and of this affinity were named art (created by one) and civilization (created by all). He spoke so surely, in *Death in Venice*, of the "tasks imposed upon him by his own ego and the European soul," that as I saw him there that night, paralyzed with admiration, I dared not conceive of such an affinity in our own Latin American culture, where the extreme demands of a ravaged, voiceless continent often killed the voice of the self and rendered a hollow political monster, or killed the voice of the society and gave birth to a pitiful, sentimental dwarf.

Yet, as I recalled my passionate readings of everything he wrote, from *Blood of the Walsungs* to *Doktor Faustus*, I could not help but feel that, in spite of the vast differences between his culture and ours, in both of them literature always asserted itself through a relationship between the visible and invisible worlds of the narration. A novel should "gather up the threads of many human destinies in the warp of a single idea"; the I, the You, and the We were only separated and dried up because of a lack of imagination.

I left Thomas Mann, unbeknownst to him, sipping his demitasse as midnight approached and the floating restaurant bobbed slightly and the Chinese lanterns quietly flickered out. I shall always thank him for silently teaching me that, in literature, you only know what you imagine.

The Mexico of the forties and fifties I wrote about in *La región más transparente* was an imagined Mexico, just as the Mexico of

the eighties and nineties I am writing about in “Cristóbal Nonato” is totally imagined. I fear that we would know nothing of Balzac’s Paris and Dickens’ London if they too had not invented them. When in the spring of 1951 I took a Dutch steamer back to the New World, I carried with me the ten Bible-paper tomes of the Pléiade edition of Balzac. This phrase of his has been a central belief of mine: “Wrest words from silence and ideas from obscurity.” The reading of Balzac — one of the most thorough and metamorphosing experiences of my life as a novelist — taught me that one must exhaust reality, transcend it in order to reach — to try to reach — that absolute which is made of the atoms of the relative: in Balzac, the marvelous worlds of *Séraphita* or *Louis Lambert* rest on the commonplace worlds of *Père Goriot* and *César Birotteau*. Likewise, the Mexican reality of *La región más transparente* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* existed only to clash with my imagination, my negation, and my perversion of the facts because, remember, I had learnt to *imagine* Mexico before I ever *knew* Mexico.

This was, finally, a way of ceasing to tell what I understood and trying to tell, behind all the things I knew, the really important things: what I did not know, *Aura* illustrates this stance much too clearly, I suppose. I prefer to find it in a scene set in a cantina in *A Change of Skin*, or in a taxi drive in *The Hydra Head*. I never wanted to resolve an enigma, but to point out that there *was* an enigma.

I always tried to ask my critics, “Don’t classify me, read me. I’m a writer, not a genre. Do not look for the purity of the novel according to some nostalgic canon, do not ask for generic affiliation but rather for a dialogue, if not for the outright abolition of genre; not for one language but for many languages at odds with one another; not, as Bakhtin would put it, for unity of style but for *heteroglossia*, not for monologic but for dialogic imagination.”

I’m afraid that, by and large, in Mexico, at least, I failed in this enterprise. Yet I am not disturbed by this fact, because of

what I have just said: language is a shared and sharing part of culture that cares little about formal classifications and much about vitality and connection, for culture itself perishes in purity or isolation, which is the deadly wages of perfection. Like bread and love, language is shared with others. And human beings share a tradition. There is no creation without tradition. No one creates from nothing.

I went back to Mexico but knew that I would forever be a wanderer in search of perspective: this was my real baptism, not the religious or the civil ceremonies I have mentioned. But no matter where I went, Spanish would be the language of my writing and Latin America the culture of my language.

Neruda, Reyes, Paz; Washington, Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Paris, Geneva; Cervantes, Balzac, Rimbaud, Thomas Mann: only with all the shared languages, those of my places and friends and masters, was I able to approach the body of fire of literature and ask it for a few sparks.

We are not alone. To write in Spanish and in Spanish America is no longer an act of isolated eccentricity. It belongs to, it leans on, a tradition. We all write, as Virginia Woolf demands of the European writer, with a feeling that all the writers since Homer are there, present in our bones as we write. When Alfonso Reyes was asked what the influences on the then-young Mexican writers Juan Rulfo and Juan José Arreola had been, he answered, "Two thousand years of literature."

Homer: we could add the Popol Vuh; Quetzalcoatl and Ulysses; Athens and the African Kalahari the Puerto Rican poet Luis Pales Matos sings about:

Where did this word come from,
Hidden like an insect in my memory?
and now alive, insistent,
fluttering blindly
against the blinding light of memory?

From its very foundation, Latin America has a profound continuity of culture and a constant fragmentation of history. An uninterrupted culture and a sporadic society; unity of civilization and political Balkanization; a triumph of art and a failure of history.

We require a model of progress of our own, not an extralogical imitation as in the more fragile errors of our history, but a critical model of our own, pertaining to our own culture, Indian, European, Black, Mestizo. This vast project of regeneration of a prostrate and vitiated continent includes the rights and obligations of literature.

The paradox of writing in a continent ravaged by illiteracy is perhaps not so great; perhaps the writer knows that he writes in order to keep alive that prodigious cultural past that rarely found historical equivalency. To write in a continent of illiterates. Indeed. And if to write now were but to communicate with those who, one day, will no longer be illiterate and will then have the right to reclaim the absent voices of today as we reclaim those of the past, to demand the *Hopscotch* that should have been published in 1963, the *Labyrinth of Solitude* that should have been published in 1950, the *Residence on Earth* that should have been published in 1933, the *Hundred Years of Solitude* that should have been published in 1967, but were not, because, then, only an elite would have read them, and, after all, the elite preferred to read bad translations of European novels. Whoever heard of Cortázar or Paz, or Neruda or García Márquez? Maybe they were silent and obscure, unpublished humorists who lived out the eighteenth century in a gaucho trading post in Tucumán, in a pink cobbled square in Mixcoac, on a foggy, rainy farm near Temuco, or on a slow boat chugging up the Magdalena River towards another heart of darkness? We don't know; we were reading *Clarissa Harlowe*.

And if to write today, always, in Spanish America were to offer but another level, another relief, to that constant territory of our civilization: the uninterrupted presence of a strong popular

culture, manual, artisanal, a singing, dancing, coloring, constructing culture? Who built Chichén Itzá and Machu Picchu, Torre Tagle in Lima and La Compañía in Quito? Our life depends on knowing this: either we say they are ghosts because we ignore our past and become ghosts ourselves, or we say they were human beings because we know our past and become human beings ourselves.

To say, with the poem, the novel, the essay, all that which has not been said by a deformed history and a mutilated polity.

And to say it in the language which is common to us all: the Spanish language.

We shall never let it go dead on us again: this is the great challenge of our generation of writers.

We shall never permit the great language of Cervantes to play the play of the Sleeping Beauty again.

We shall wake her up with our fists, we will kick her, we will slap her around.

We will hopscotch the language.

We will one hundred years of solitudinize it.

We will reside it on earth, paradise it, explode it in a cathedral, alephize it, betray it with Rita Hayworth, feed it to the obscure bird of night and let the three trapped tigers devour it.

Catch them by the tail, says Octavio Paz, capture them, rip them open, make the sluts scream: the words, our words, once more.

Let us not lose them again, because now we have our words counted.