Miguel Angel Asturias’s archaeology of return

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 (1969). 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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RENÉ PRIETO
To kawa and leps
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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 overrebellion.

During the year I spent at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, I was also very fortunate to have the expert advice of Jean-Louis Houdebine from the Sorbonne. I wish to thank him as well as a handful of very dear friends – Kay Beers, Bob and Polly Maguire, Rick and Martha Lapham, David and Jean Littlefield, Catherine Borovsk, Claude Chatelard, and Janet Beers-Winkler – without whose loyalty, intelligence, and support this project might not have got off the ground.

I was able to continue beyond the first stage of planning and research in Paris thanks to the generosity of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Endowment has funded my work on Asturias on two occasions: first, with a year-long fellowship that provided the time, the tools, and the occasion to study Mayan anthropology; then, three years later, with a Travel to Collections grant that allowed me to return to Paris.
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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