Miguel Angel Asturias

Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974) recipient of the 1967 Nobel Prize in Literature is one of the most decorated Guatemalan writers in history. He was born in Guatemala City in 1899 during the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera. Under Cabrera, Asturias’ father, a lawyer and a judge, was persecuted and forced out of his position, causing the family to flee to the countryside. Living in rural Salamá as a child, Asturias learned many of the myths of the Maya from his caretakers. His time there would greatly influence his views on the social politics of Guatemala as well as his innovations in narrative form. Asturias’ narrative technique is modernist in both its use of anthropology as its methodology and in its experimental form that combines a mythical past with a contemporary, experiential narrative structure.

Asturias attended law school in Guatemala City and where and he and his colleagues, a group of students, educators and writers informally known as the “Generación del 20,” founded the Universidad Popular [Popular University] in 1922. They enlisted the help of the educated middle class to teach free courses to the underprivileged of the city. Concentrating their efforts on combating Guatemala’s widespread illiteracy, they established libraries and taughtclasses wherever they could, in homes, on worksites and in prisons, the aim of the Universidad Popular was to raise the libratory consciousness of the populace and to give voice to their own social condition (Sáenz 1974: 30).

With these same goals in mind Asturias wrote his thesis, “El problema social del indio” in 1923 on the plight of the nation’s indigenous populations who were excluded from most governmental and social structures of the era. In its day it won the prize for best thesis and drew on ideas of anti-imperialism and of creating a uniquely Latin American identity that included the long history of its peoples. However, the work has recently drawn ire from contemporary Mayan writers who critique Asturias’s outsider position to the Mayan culture as well as his ideas of assimilation and eugenics as solutions to this exclusion (Arias 2006: 1).

His political involvement carried forward into adulthood. He served in Guatemala’s diplomatic core and was elected to Congress in 1942. During this time, he wrote his novel *El Señor Presidente* [*The President*] a semi-fictious account of an unnamed dictator. The form of this novel echoes the paranoia of life under a dictatorship supplying the reader with misinformation, rumor and lies, leaving the reader to disentangle the conflicting narrative threads. Although the book was begun in the 1920s and completed 1933, in the new political climate under the regime of Jorge Ubico (1931–1944), it could not be published until 1946 when it first appeared in print in Mexico (Sáenz 1974: 106–114).

After receiving his degree he moved to Europe where he developed his interest in indigenous culture, translating the *Popol Vuh*, a 16th century text written in K’iché that tells the origin story of the Mayan peoples. Although Asturias was working from a French translation of the text and not the original language, his translation would bring the story and its Mayan history back into the cultural consciousness of the literary elite. Published in 1930, *Leyendas de Guatemala* [*Legends of Gautemala*] is a short story collection that retells Mayan legends in modern day settings. This text marks the beginning of his use of modernist experimentation in form.

Asturias perfects his combination of indigenous legends and a novelistic form constructed to represent the specific, hybrid consciousness of the Gautemalan people in his 1949 novel *Hombres de maíz* [*Men of Maize*]. The novel uses a type of mythic time that does not rely on a simple cause and effect relation to narrative progression that aims to capture the rhythms, structures, and orality of the K’iché language in order to represent the impact of imperialism on of an indigenous community (Palacios 2006: 82). It was for this novel that Asturias won the 1967 Nobel Prize.

Although many were surprised by the choice because of his relative obscurity outside of Latin America, he was a major figure in Latin America and had received a number of other awards including the Lenin Peace Prize in 1966 for his epic trilogy that includes three novels *Viento fuerte* [*Strong Wind*] *El Papa verde* [*The Green Pope*], and *Los ojos de los enterrados* [*The Eyes of the Interred*]. Also called La trilogía bananera [The Banana Trilogy], this set of novels explores the exploitation of indigenous workers at the hands of companies like the fictionalized multinational companies. As in *Hombres de maíz*, Asturias uses the mythologies of the *Popul Vuh* as the anchor for this text, combining ancient symbols with contemporary issues. In creating this new hybrid reality in his fiction, his work operates not simply for the sake of form or artistic merit, but also to elucidate the problems of the continent (Callan 1970: 14).

With its combination of mythical elements and alternate conceptions of time, Asturias’s work participates in magical realism, particularly his later novels *El alhajadito* (1961), *Mulata de Tal* (1963), and *Maladrón* (1969) (Callan 1970: 162). *Mulata de Tal*, perhaps the best known of these three, presents a complex narrative based in Mayan histories that Asturias maps onto the contemporary political crisis between the U.S. and Guatemala, including the 1954 invasion that ousted President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán and led to a brutal civil war (Arias 2006: 14).

Because of his support for Árbenz, Asturias was expelled the country, stripped of his Guatemalan citizenship, and lived in exile until unrest in Argentina sent him to Europe. Asturias returned home in 1966 when Julio César Méndez Montenegro came to power. He was then named ambassador to France and died in Paris in 1974. Guatemala’s national literary prize is named in honor of Asturias in recognition of his long lasting contributions to Latin American letters.

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