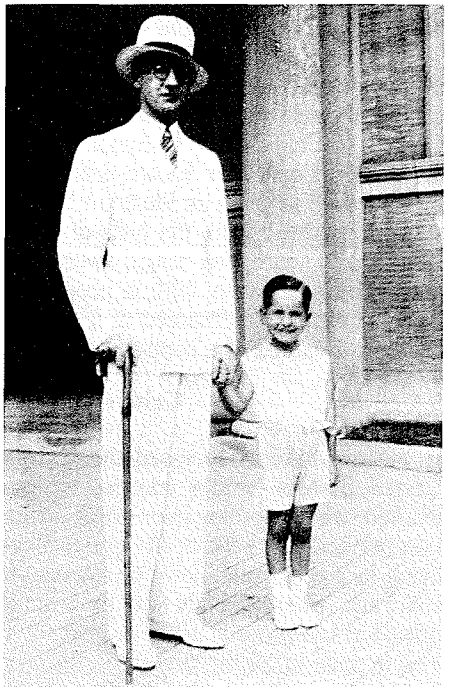
Discovering Mexico

Novelist Carlos Fuentes has spent much of his life on the move. He has served as Mexico's ambassador to France and has been a visiting professor at numerous European and American universities. The son of a diplomat, he grew up in Panama, the United States, Chile, and Argentina. As a result, Fuentes explains, he learned "to imagine Mexico" before he really knew it. The experience proved invaluable. It taught him that the only worlds that remain new are those discovered by the imagination—the New Worlds of literature.

by Carlos Fuentes

I was born on 11 November 1928, under the sign I would have chosen, Scorpio, and on a date shared with Dostoyevsky, Crommelynck, and Vonnegut. My mother was rushed from a steaming-hot movie house in those days before Colonel Buendía 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 had a tug-of-war with my words, as if expecting the Scorpio of fiction to rise from silent music and blind images.

All this, let me add, took place in the sweltering heat of Panama City, where my father was beginning his diplomatic career as an attaché to the Mexican legation. Since he was a convinced Mexican nationalist, my father insisted that the problem of where I was to be born had to be resolved under another "sign": not of Scorpio but of the Eagle and the Serpent. The Mexican legation, however, though it had extraterritorial rights, did not have a territorial midwife, and the minister, a fastidious bachelor, would not have me suddenly appearing on the legation parquet. 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, naturally, the best hospitals were. So, between two territorial fictions—the Mexican legation, the Canal Zone—and a silent close-up of John Gilbert, I arrived in the nick of time at the Gorgas Hospital in Panama City at eleven that evening.



Portrait of the artist as a young boy: Carlos Fuentes with his father, counselor of the Mexican Embassy, on the streets of Washington, D.C., in the early days of the Great Depression.

The problem of my baptism then arose. As if the waters of the two oceans touching each other with 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; but my national baptism took place a few months later in Mexico City, where my father, an incorrigible Jacobin and priest-hater to the end, insisted that I be registered in the civil rolls established by Benito Juárez. That I am a native of Mexico City for all legal purposes illustrates a central fact of my life and my writing: I am Mexican by will and imagination.

All this came to a head when my father was counselor of the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C., and I was growing up in the vibrant world of the American '30s, more or less between the inauguration of Citizen Roosevelt and the interdiction of Citizen Kane. When I arrived in the United States, 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.

My father made me read Mexican history, study Mexican geography, and understand the names, the dreams, and the defeats of Mexico: a nonexistent country, I thought, invented by my father to nourish my infant imagination; an Oz with a green cactus road, a landscape and a soul so

different from those of the United States that they seemed 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 Belleau Wood: Had this nation never known defeat? Sometimes the names of U.S. victories were the same as Mexico's humiliations: Monterrey-Veracruz. Chapultepec. Indeed: from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli.

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

Grits Over Guacamole

Many things impressed themselves on me during those years. The United States—would you believe it?—was a country where things worked, where nothing ever broke down: Plumbing, roads 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 superbly furnished seven-room apartment cost us 110 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, and an invisible taskmaster called Puritanical Duty still shadows my every footstep: I shall not deserve anything unless I work for it, with iron discipline, day after day. Sloth is sin, and if I do not sit down at my typewriter every day at 8:00 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 *ay-ay-ay*.

The nation that Tocqueville saw destined to dominate over half the world realized that only a continental state could be a modern state; in the '30s, the United States had to decide what to do with its new power, and Franklin Roosevelt taught us to believe that the United States had to show that it was capable of living up to its ideals. I learned then—my first political lesson—that this idealism is the true greatness of the United States, not (the norm during my lifetime) material wealth, not power arro-

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gantly misused against weaker peoples, not ignorant ethnocentrism burning itself out in contempt for others. I saw a nation of boundless energy and the will to confront the great social issues of the times without blinking. It was 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 capital, the renewable wealth of education.

I saw the United States during the '30s lift itself from the dead dust of Oklahoma and the grey lines of the unemployed in Detroit, and this image of health was reflected in my life, in my reading of Mark Twain, in the 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 Walker Evans's photographs of hungry migrant 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 state public school, nonconfessional and coeducational—reflected these realities and their basic egalitarianism. I believed in the democratic simplicity of my teachers and chums, and above all I believed I was, naturally, in a totally un-self-conscious way, a part of this 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—18 March 1938. On that day, a man from another world, the imaginary country of my childhood, the president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, 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.

The Community of Time

Instantly, I became a pariah in my school. Cold shoulders, aggressive stares, epithets, and sometimes blows. Children know how to be cruel. And this was not reserved for me or for Mexico. At about the same time, an extremely brilliant boy of 11 arrived from Germany. He was a Jew and his family had fled from the Nazis. This young man, Hans Berliner, had a brilliant mathematical mind and he walked and saluted like a Central European. He wore short pants, high woven stockings, and Tyrolean jackets, and had 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.

I discovered that my father's country was real. And that I belonged to it. Mexico was my identity, yet I myself lacked an identity. Hans Berliner suffered more than I—headlines from Mexico are soon forgotten and another great issue becomes another 10-day media feast—yet he had an identity: He was a Central European Jew. I looked at the photographs of

President Cárdenas: 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 hillock of statistics in a yearbook? I believe I then had the intuition that I would not rest until I came to grips myself with that common destiny that depended upon still another community: the community of time. 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 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 that I later learned to understand in the stone serpents of Teotihuacán and in the polychrome angels of Oaxaca.

Rugby, Ruskin, and Stiff Upper Lips

In 1939, 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 up on the seat and proclaimed on my own and from the full height of my nationalist 10 years, "*Viva Méxicol* Death to the *gringos*!" My embarrassed father hauled me out of the theater, but his pride in me could not resist leaking my first rebellious act to the *Washington Star.*

In the wake of my father's diplomatic career, I traveled to Chile and entered the universe of the Spanish language, of Latin American politics and its adversities. President Roosevelt had resisted enormous pressures to apply sanctions and even invade Mexico to punish my country for recovering its own wealth. Likewise, he did not try to destabilize the Chilean radicals, communists and socialists democratically elected to power under the banners of the Popular Front. In the early '40s, the vigor 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 a literary testament rescued from a gutted house and a nameless tomb, a beautiful song to the Spanish language. The Conquistadors, he said, took our gold, but they left us their gold: They left us our words. Neruda's gold, I learned 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, to guitar music, 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 and had always been sung, like Homer's. I learned in Chile that Spanish could be the language of free men.

Chile offered me and the other writers of my generation in Santiago both a fragile, cornered language, Spanish, and one that preserved the Latin of our times, the lingua franca of the modern world, English. At the Grange School, a mini-Britannia under the awesome beauty of the Andes, José Donoso and Jorge Edwards, Roberto Torretti, the late Luis Alberto Heyremans and myself, by then all budding amateurs, wrote our first exercises in literature. We all ran strenuous cross-country races, got caned from time to time, and recuperated while reading Swinburne; we were subjected to huge doses of rugby, Ruskin, porridge for breakfast, and a stiff upper lip in military defeats. When Montgomery broke through at El Alamein, the assembled school tossed caps in the air and hip-hip-hoorayed to death. In South America, clubs were named after George Canning and football teams after Lord Cochrane; no matter that English help in winning 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.

The Summer of '44

And here lay, for my generation, the central contradiction of our relationship with the English-speaking world: You have made universal the values of modernity, freedom, economic development, and democracy; but when we develop these values in Latin America in our own way within our own culture, your governments brand us Marxist-Leninist tools, side with the military protectors of a status quo dating back to the Spanish conquest, attribute the dynamics of our change to an evil Soviet conspiracy, and finally corrupt the movement toward modernity that you yourselves have fostered.

Nevertheless, my passage from English to Spanish determined the concrete expression of what 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: As I scribbled my first stories for school magazines, I learned that I must write in Spanish.

In Chile I came to know the possibilities of our language for giving wing to freedom and poetry. The impression was enduring; it links me forever to that sad and wonderful land. It lives within me, and it transformed me into a man who knows how to dream, love, insult, and write

The glee club at Spain's University of Alcais de Honares salutes Carlos Fuentes (second from left) shortly after he received the prestigious Miguel de Cervantes Prize for Literature at a royal ceremony on April 21, 1988.

only in Spanish. It also left me wide open to an incessant interrogation: What happened to this universal language, Spanish, which after the 17th century ceased to be a language of life, creation, dissatisfaction, and personal power, and became far too often a language of mourning, sterility, rhetorical applause, and abstract power? Where were the threads of my tradition, where could I, writing in mid-20th-century 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 winter, my Góngora, abandoned in a gulf of loneliness?

After Santiago, I spent six wonderful months in Argentina. They were so important in this reading and writing of myself. Buenos Aires was then, as always, the most beautiful, sophisticated, and civilized city in Latin America, but in the summer of 1944, as pavements melted in the heat and the city smelled of cheap wartime gasoline, rawhide from the port, and chocolate éclairs from the *confiterías*, Argentina had experienced a succession of military coups: General Rawson had overthrown President Castillo of the cattle oligarchy, but General Ramírez had then overthrown Rawson, and now General Farrell had overthrown Ramírez. A young colonel called Juan Domingo Perón was General Farrell's up-and-coming minister of labor, and I heard an actress by the name of Eva Duarte play the "great women of history" on Radio Belgrano. A hack novelist who went by the pen name Hugo Wast was assigned to the Ministry of Education under his real name, Martínez Zuviría, and brought all his anti-Semitic, undemocratic, pro-fascist phobias to the Buenos Aires high school system, which I

had been plunked into. Coming from the America of the New Deal, the ideals 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, following my preferred tango orchestras as they played in the Renoir-like shade and light of the rivers and pavilions of El Tigre and Maldonado.

The Gold and Mud of Mexico

Two very important things happened in Argentina. First, I lost my virginity. And second, I started reading Argentine literature, from gaucho poems to Sarmiento's *Memories of Provincial Life* to Cané's *Juvenilia* to *Don Segundo Sombra* to Borges. Borges belongs to that summer in Buenos Aires. He belongs to my discovery of Latin American literature.

I read Borges's *Ficciones* as I flew north on a Pan American Airways flying boat. It was wartime; all cameras were banned, and glazed plastic screens were put on our windows before we landed. By the time we landed in Trinidad, "Funes the Memorious" and "Pierre Ménard, Author of Don Quixote" had introduced me, without my being aware, 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 by Borges to encounter my wonderful friends: Toby Shandy, who reconstructs in his cabbage patch the battlefields of Flanders he was not able to experience historically; Jane Austen's Catherine Moreland and Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary, who, like Don Quixote, believe in what they read; Dickens's Mr. Micawber, who takes his hopes to be realities; Dostoyevsky's Myshkin, an idiot because he gives the benefit of the doubt to the good possibility of mankind; Pérez Galdós's Nazarín, who is mad because he believes that each human being can daily be Christ, and who is truly St. Paul's madman: "Let him who seems wise among you become mad, so that he might truly become wise."

As we landed 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.

When I finally arrived in Mexico, I found that my father's imaginary country was real, but nonetheless fantastic. Mexico: the only frontier between the industrialized and the developing worlds, between all of Latin America and the United States, and between the Catholic Mediterranean and the Protestant Anglo-Saxon strains of the New World.

I approached the gold and mud of Mexico, the imaginary, imagined country, finally real but only real if I saw it from a distance that would assure me, because of the very fact of separation, that my desire for

reunion with it would be forever urgent, and only real if I wrote it.

My first contact with literature and its language had been sitting on the knees of Alfonso Reyes. When the Mexican writer was ambassador to Brazil in the earlier '30s, Reyes had brought the Spanish classics back to life for us; he had written 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 '40s, 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 18 and a night prowler, I kept him company from eleven in the morning, when Don Alfonso would sit in a cafe and toss verbal bouquets at the girls strolling around the plaza that was then a garden of laurels and not, as it has become, of cement. Then we would go to the movies in order, Reyes said, to bathe in contemporary epic, and it was only at night that he would start scolding me: 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 variation on the past. Borges said 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.

Egg Without Salt

One day I got up very early (or maybe I came in very late from a binge) and saw him at 5:00 A.M. working at his table, amid the aroma 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 day in February 1913 when his insurrectionist father, General Bernardo Reyes, fell riddled by machine-gun bullets in Mexico City.

My father had remained in Buenos Aires as Mexican chargé d'affaires, with instructions to frown on Argentina's Axis sympathies. My mother took advantage of his absence to put me in a Catholic school in Mexico City. The brothers who ruled the institution were preoccupied with something that had never entered my head: sin. At the start of the school year, one would come 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 object, and confirm our worst suspicions: "This is a Catholic boy after . . . "

Well, all this filled life with temptation. Retrospectively, I would agree with Luis Buñuel that sex without sin is like an egg without salt. The

priests 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 distinctions made it very 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, go out and be a writer, but not at my expense. I was sent, again, to visit Alfonso Reyes. 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 what you wish, as I did."

The Perils of 'Proustitution'

So I entered the School of Law at the National University, where, as I feared, learning tended to be by rote and where cynical teachers spent the whole hour of class taking attendance on the 200 students of civil law, from Aguilar to Zapata. But there were exceptions: The true teachers—mainly exiles from defeated Republican Spain—understood that the law is inseparable from the concerns of culture, morality, and justice. 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: "Forget the codes. Read Dostoyevsky, read Balzac. There's all you have to know about criminal or commercial law." He also made me see that Stendhal was right: that the best model for a well-structured novel is the Napoleonic Code of Civil Law. Anyway, I found that culture consists of connections, not of separations.

In 1950 I went to Europe to do graduate work in international law at the University of 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 these books aloud in Mexico, dazzled by a poetics that managed simultaneously to renew our language from within and to connect it to the language of the world.

At 36, 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 Albert Camus, who alternated philosophy and the boogie-woogie in La Rose Rouge. In the generous friendship of Octavio Paz, I learned 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.

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 teaching of the classics in Mexican secondary schools: One had to bring Cervantes back to life in spite of a school system fatally oriented toward the ideal of universities as sausage factories—in spite of the more grotesque forms of Mexican nationalism of 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), and a rather sterile Mexican author gave a pompous lecture warning that readers who read Proust would *proustitute* themselves.

'The Warp of a Single Idea'

In Geneva, I rented a garret overlooking the beautiful old square of the Bourg-du-Four, established by Julius Caesar as the Forum Boarium two millennia ago. The square was filled with coffeehouses and old bookstores. The girls, from all over, were beautiful and independent. After kissing them, one did not become a sullied lily. We had salt on our lips. We loved each other, and I also loved going to the little island where the lake meets the river to read. Since it was called Jean-Jacques Rousseau Island, I took 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 Abélard to Dante to Rousseau to Stendhal to Proust.

And I wondered: Could I, a Mexican who had not yet written his first book, sitting on a bench on an early spring day as the *bise* 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 to which the literary figure bids us? Cervantes did it. He brought into existence the modern world by having Don Quixote leave his secure village (whose name has been, let us remember, forgotten) and take to the open roads, 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 traveling Don Quixote's road, from the security of the analogous to the adventure of the different and even the unknown. This is the road I wanted to travel. I also discovered the challenge of Rimbaud. His mother had asked him what a particular poem was about, and he answered: "I have wanted to say what it says there, literally and in all other senses." This has been an inflexible rule for me; and the present-day vigor of the literature of the Hispanic world is not alien to this approach: 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 first I would have to do my apprenticeship. Only after many years would I be able to write what I then imagined; only years later, when I not only knew that I had the tools with which to do it, but also, equally important, when I knew that if I did not write, death would not do it for me.

In the summer of 1950, on a hot, calm evening on Lake Zurich, some wealthy Mexican friends had invited me to dinner at the elegant Baur-au-

Lac Hotel—a floating terrace lighted by paper lanterns and flickering candles. As I unfolded my white napkin amid the soothing tinkle of silver and glass, I raised my eyes and saw the group at the next table.

Three ladies sat there with a man in his seventies. This man was stiff and elegantly 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 unbending, with a ramrod-back, military bearing. His aged face showed "a growing fatigue," but the pride with which his lips and jaws were set sought desperately to hide the fact, while the eyes twinkled with "the fiery play of fancy."

As the carnival lights of that night 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 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 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, paralyzed with admiration, saw him there 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 made a hollow political monster of the voice of the society, or killed it, giving birth to a pitiful, sentimental dwarf.

Yet, as I recalled my passionate reading of everything he wrote, from *Blood of the Walsungs* to *Dr. Faustus*, I could not help feeling that, in spite of the vast differences between his culture and ours, literature in the end asserted itself through a relationship between the visible and the invisible worlds of 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 separate and dried up because of a lack of imagination. Unbeknownst to him, I left Thomas Mann 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 know only what you imagine.