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On Reading and Writing Myself: How I Wrote *Aura*

To my immortal friend, Lillian Hellman

By CARLOS FUENTES ONE, yes, ONE GIRL, twenty years of age, in the summer of '61, over twenty-two years ago, crossed the threshold between the small drawing room of an apartment on the Boulevard Raspail and entered the bedroom where I was waiting for her.

There was a rumor of discontent and a smell of explosives in the French capital. These were the years when De Gaulle was finding a way out from Algeria and the OAS, the Secret Army Organization, was indiscriminately blowing up Jean-Paul Sartre and his concierge: the bombs of the generals were egalitarian.

But Paris is a double city; whatever happens there possesses a mirage which seems to reproduce the space of actuality. We soon learn that this is a form of deceit. The abundant mirrors of Parisian interiors do more than simply reproduce a certain space. Gabriel García Márquez says that with their army of mirrors the Parisians create the illusion that their narrow apartments are double their real size. The true mystery—Gabriel and I know this—is that what we see reflected in those mirrors is always *another* time, time past, time yet to be. And that, sometimes, if you are lucky, a person who is *another* person also floats across these quicksilver lakes.

I believe that the mirrors of Paris contain something more than their own illusion. They are, at the same time, the reflection of something less tangible: the light of the city, a light I have attempted to describe many times, in political chronicles of the events of May 1968 and of May 1981 and in novels such as *Distant Relations*, where I say that the light of Paris is identical to “the expectation that every afternoon . . . for one miraculous moment, the phenomena of the day—rain or fog, scorching heat or snow—[will] disperse and reveal, as in a Corot landscape, the luminous essence of the Île de France.”

A second space: A second person—the other person—in the mirror is not born *in* the mirror: she comes from the light. The girl who wandered in from her living room into her bedroom that hot afternoon in early September more than twenty years ago was another *because* six years had gone by since I first met her, in the budding grove of her puberty, in Mexico.

But she was also another because the light that afternoon, as if it had been expecting her, defeated a stubborn reef of clouds. That light—I remember it—

first stepped through timidly, as if stealing by the menace of a summer's storm; then it transformed itself into a luminous pearl encased in a shell of clouds; finally it spilled over for a few seconds with a plenitude that was also an agony.

In this almost instantaneous succession, the girl I remembered when she was fourteen years old and who was now twenty suffered the same changes as the light coming through the windowpanes: that threshold between the parlor and the bedroom became the lintel between all the ages of this girl: the light that had been struggling against the clouds also fought against her flesh, took it, sketched it, granted her a shadow of years, sculpted a death in her eyes, tore the smile from her lips, waned through her hair with the floating melancholy of madness.

She was another, she had been another, not she who was going to be but she who, always, was being.

The light possessed the girl, the light made love to the girl before I could, and I was only, that afternoon, “a strange guest in the kingdom of love” (“en el reino del amor huésped extraño”), and knew that the eyes of love can also see us with—once more I quote Quevedo—“a beautiful Death.”

The next morning I started writing *Aura* in a café near my hotel on the rue de Berri. I remember the day: Khrushchev had just read his twenty-year plan in Moscow, where he promised communism and the withering away of the state by the '80s—here we are now—burying the West in the process, and his words were reproduced in all their gray minuteness in the *International Herald Tribune* which was being hawked by ghostly girls, young lovers jailed in brief prisons of passion, the authors of *Aura*: the dead girls.

TWO, yes, TWO YEARS BEFORE I was having a few drinks with Luis Buñuel in his house on the Street of Providence, and we talked about Quevedo, a poet the Spanish film director knows better than most academic specialists on baroque poetry of the seventeenth century.

You have already noticed, of course, that the true author of *Aura* (including the dead girls I have just mentioned) is named Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas, born on 17 September 1580 in Madrid and supposedly deceased on 8 September 1645 in Villanueva de los Infantes; the satirical and scatological brother of Swift, but also the unrivaled poet of our death and love, our Shakespeare, our John Donne, the furious enemy

of Góngora, the political agent for the Duke of Osuna, the unfortunate, jailed partisan of fallen power, the obscene, the sublime Quevedo dead in his stoical tower, dreaming, laughing, searching, finding some of the truly immortal lines in the Spanish language:

Oh condición mortal Oh dura suerte
Que no puedo querer vivir mañana
Sin la pensión de procurar mi muerte.

(Oh mortal state Oh man's unyielding fate
To live tomorrow I can have no hope
Without the cost of buying my own death.)

Or maybe these lines, defining love:

Es yelo abrasador, es fuego helado,
es herida que duele y no se siente,
es un soñado bien, un mal presente,
es un breve descanso muy cansado.

(It is a freezing fire, a burning ice,
it is a wound that hurts yet is not felt,
a happiness desired, a present evil,
a short but oh so tiring rest.)

Yes, the true author of *Aura* is Quevedo, and I am pleased to represent him here today.

This is the great advantage of time: the so-called "author" ceases to be such; he becomes an invisible agent for him who signed the book, published it and collected (and goes on collecting) the royalties. But the book was written—it always was, it always is—by others. Quevedo and a girl who was almost dust in love, *polvo enamorado*. Buñuel and an afternoon in Mexico City, so different from an afternoon in Paris but so different also, in 1959, from the afternoons in Mexico City today.

You could see the two volcanoes, Popocatepetl the smoking mountain and Iztaccihuatl the sleeping lady as you drove down Insurgentes Avenue, and the big department store had not yet been erected on the corner of Buñuel's house. Buñuel himself, behind a minimonastery of very high brick walls crowned by crushed glass, had returned to the Mexican cinema with *Nazarín* and was now playing around in his head with an old idea: a filmic transposition of Géricault's painting *Le radeau de la Méduse*, which hangs at the Louvre and describes the drama of the survivors of a naval disaster in the eighteenth century.

The survivors of the good ship *Medusa* at first tried to behave like civilized human beings as they floated around in their raft. But then, as the days went by, followed by weeks, finally by what seemed like an eternity, their imprisonment on the sea cracked the varnish of good manners and they became salt first, then waves, finally sharks: in the end they survived only because they devoured each other. They needed one another to exterminate one another.

Of course, the cinematic translation of the terrible gaze of the *Medusa* is called *The Exterminating Angel*, one of Buñuel's most beautiful films, in which a group of society people who have never truly needed any-

thing find themselves mysteriously incapable of leaving an elegant salon. The threshold of the salon becomes an abyss and necessity becomes extermination: the shipwrecks of Providence Street only need each other to devour each other.

The theme of necessity is profound and persistent in Buñuel, and his films repeatedly reveal the way in which a man and a woman, a child and a madman, a saint and a sinner, a criminal and a dreamer, a solitude and a desire need one another.

Buñuel was inventing his film *The Exterminating Angel* and crossing back and forth, as he did so, over the threshold between the lobby and the bar of his house, looking for all the world like a pensioned picador from old Cagancho's cuadrilla. Buñuel's comings and goings were, somehow, a form of immobility.

A todas partes que me vuelvo veo
Las amenazas de la llama ardiente
Y en cualquier lugar tengo presente
Tormento esquivo y burlador desco.

(Everywhere I turn I see
The menace of the burning flame
And everywhere I am aware
Of aloof torment and mocking desire.)

Since we had been talking about Quevedo and a portrait of the young Buñuel by Dalí in the '20s was staring at us, Éluard's poetic formula imposed itself on my spirit that faraway Mexican afternoon of transparent air and smell of burnt tortilla and newly sliced chiles and fugitive flowers: "Poetry shall be reciprocal"; and if Buñuel was thinking of Géricault and Quevedo and the film, I was thinking that the raft of the *Medusa* already contained two eyes of stone that would trap the characters of *The Exterminating Angel* not only in the fiction of a shadow projected on the screen, but within the physical and mechanical reality of the camera that would, from then on, be the true prison of the shipwrecks of Providence: a camera (why not?) on top of Lautréamont's poetical meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.

Buñuel stopped midway between lobby and bar and asked aloud: "And if on crossing a doorsill we could instantly recover our youth; if we could be old on *one* side of the door and young as soon as we crossed to the *other* side, what then . . . ?"

THREE, yes THREE DAYS AFTER that afternoon on the Boulevard Raspail I went to see a picture that all my friends, but especially Julio Cortázar, were raving about: *Ugetsu Monogatari: The Tales of the Pale Moon After the Rain*, by the Japanese filmmaker Kenji Mizoguchi. I was carrying around with me the first feverish pages of *Aura*, written in that café near the Champs Élysées as I let my breakfast of coffee and croissants grow cold and forgot the headlines of the morning *Figaro*. "You read the advertisement: this kind of offer is not made every day. You read it and then reread it. It seems addressed to you and to nobody else."

Because "You are Another," such was the subjacent vision of my meetings with Buñuel in Mexico, with the girl imprisoned by the light in Paris, with Quevedo in the freezing fire, the burning ice, the wound that hurts yet is not felt, the happiness desired, the present evil which proclaims itself as Love but was first of all Desire. Curiously, Mizoguchi's film was being shown in the Ursulines Cinema, the same place where, more than thirty years before, Buñuel's *Andalusian Dog* had been first screened to a vastly scandalized audience. You remember that Red Cross nurses had to be posted in the aisles to help the ladies who fainted when Buñuel, on the screen, slashes the eye of a girl with a razor as a cloud bisects the moon.

The evanescent images of Mizoguchi told the beautiful love story adapted by the Japanese director from the tale "The House Among the Reeds," from the collection of the *Ugetsu Monogatari*, written in the eighteenth century by Ueda Akinari, born in 1734 in the red-light district at Sonezaki, the son of a courtesan and an unknown father. His mother abandoned him when he was four years old; he was adopted and raised by a family of paper and oil merchants, the Ueda, with

infinite love and care, but also with a profound sense of nostalgia and doom: the happy merchants were unclassified by commerce from their former military tradition; Akinari contracted the pox and was saved perhaps by his adoptive mother's contracting of the disease: she died, he was left crippled in both hands until the God of Foxes, Inari, permitted him to hold a brush and become a calligraphist and, thus, a writer.

But first he inherited a prosperous business; it was destroyed by fire. Then he became a doctor: a little girl whom he was treating died, yet her father continued to have faith in him. So he gave up medicine. He could only be a lame writer, somehow a character in his own stories, persecuted by bad luck, poverty, illness, blindness. Abandoned as a child, Akinari spent his late years dependent on the charity of others, living in temples or the houses of friends. He was an erudite. He did not commit suicide, yet died in 1809.

So with his sick hand miraculously aided by the God of Foxes, Ueda Akinari could take a brush and thus write a series of tales that are unique because they are multiple.

"Originality" is the sickness of a modernity that



GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, JULIO CORTÁZAR AND FUENTES
PARIS, 1976

wishes to see itself as something new, always new, in order continually to witness its own birth. In so doing, modernity is that fashionable illusion which only speaks to death.

This is the subject of one of the great dialogues by the magnificent Italian poet and essayist of the nineteenth century, Giacomo Leopardi. Read Leopardi: he is in the wind. I was reading him with joy in the winter of '81, then met Susan Sontag in New York the following spring. She had been surprised by a December dawn in Rome reading Leopardi: like Akinari, infirm; unlike him, a disillusioned romanticist turned pessimistic materialist and maybe, because he knew that in mankind, "outside of vanity, all is pain," he could write some of the most burning lyrical marvels in the Italian language and tell us that life can be unhappy when "hope has disappeared but desire remains intact." For the same reason, he could write the biting dialogue of Fashion and Death:

FASHION: Lady Death! Lady Death!

DEATH: I hope that your hour comes, so that you shall have no further need to call me.



FUENTES WITH WILLIAM STYRON AT THE FOIRE DU LIVRE, PARIS, MAY 1981

FASHION: My Lady Death!

DEATH: Go to the Devil! I'll come looking for you when you least desire me.

FASHION: But I am your sister, Fashion. Have you forgotten that we are both the daughters of decadence?

Ancient peoples know that there are no words that do not descend from other words and that imagination only resembles power because neither can reign over *Nada*, Nothing, *Niente*. To imagine Nothing, or to believe that you rule over Nothing, is but a form—perhaps the surest one—of becoming mad. No one knew this better than Joseph Conrad in the heart of darkness or William Styron in the bed of shadows: the wages of sin are not death, but isolation.

Akinari's novella is set in 1454 and tells the story of Katsushiro, a young man humiliated by his poverty and his incapacity for work in the fields who abandons his home in order to make his fortune as a merchant in the city. He leaves his house by the reeds in the care of his young and beautiful wife Miyagi, promising he will return as the leaves of autumn fall.

Months go by; the husband does not return; the woman resigns herself to "the law of this world: no one should have faith in tomorrow." The civil wars of the fifteenth century under the Ashikaga shoguns make the reencounter of husband and wife impossible. People worry only about saving their skins, the old hide in the mountains, the young are forcibly drafted by the competing armies; all burn and loot; confusion takes hold of the world and the human heart also becomes ferocious. "Everything" says the author, reminding us that he is speaking from memory, "everything was in ruins during that miserable century."

Katsushiro becomes prosperous and manages to travel to Kyoto. Once settled there, seven years after he has bade farewell to Miyagi, he tries to return home but finds that the barriers of political conflict have not fallen, nor have the menaces of assault by bandits disappeared. He is fearful of returning to find his home in ruins, as in the myths of the past. A fever takes hold of him. The seven years have gone by as in a dream. The man imagines that the woman, like himself, is a prisoner of time and that, like himself, she has not been able to stretch out her hand and touch the fingers of the loved one.

The proofs of precarious humanity surround Katsushiro; bodies pile up in the streets; he walks among them. Neither he nor the dead are immortal. The first form of death is an answer to time: its name is forgetting, and maybe Katsushiro's wife (he imagines this) has already died; she is but a denizen of the subterranean regions.

So it is death that, finally, leads Katsushiro back to his village: if his wife has died, he will build a small altar for her during the night, taking advantage of the moon of the rainy season.

He returns to his ruined village. The pine that used to identify his house has been struck by lightning. But the house is still there. Katsushiro sees the light from

a lamp. Is a stranger now living in his house? Katsushiro crosses the threshold, enters and hears a very ancient voice say, "Who goes there?" He answers, "It is I, I have come back."

Miyagi recognizes her husband's voice. She comes near to him, dressed in black and covered with grime, her eyes sunken, her knotted hair falling down her back. She is not the woman she had been. But when she sees her husband, without adding a word, she bursts out crying.

The man and the woman go to bed together and he tells her the reason why he has been so late in returning and of his resignation; she answers that the world had become full of horror, but that she had waited in vain: "If I had perished from love," she concludes, "hoping to see you again, I would have died of a lovesickness ignored by you."

They sleep embraced, deeply sleeping. As day breaks, a vague impression of coldness penetrates the unconsciousness of Katsushiro's dream. A rumor of something floating by awakens him. A cold liquid falls, drop after drop, on his face. His wife is no longer lying next to him. She has become invisible. He will never see her again.

Katsushiro discovers an old servant hidden in a hut in the middle of a field of camphor. The servant tells the hero the truth: Miyagi died many years ago. She was the only woman who never quit the village, in spite of the terrible dangers of war, because she kept alive the promise: we shall see each other once again this autumn. Not only the bandits invaded this place. Ghosts also took up their lodgings here. One day Miyagi joined them.

Mizoguchi's images told a story similar yet different from Akinari's tale. Less innocent, the contemporary filmmaker's story transformed Miyagi into a sort of tainted Penelope, a former courtesan who must prove her fidelity to her husband with greater conviction than a virgin.

When the village is invaded by the troops of Governor Uesugui sent from Kamakura to fight a ghostly and evasive shogun in the mountains, Miyagi, to save herself from the violence of the soldiers, commits suicide. The soldiers bury her in her garden, and when her husband finally returns, he must appeal to an old witch in order to recover the spectral vision and the spectral contact with his dead wife.

FOUR, no, FOUR YEARS AFTER seeing the film by Mizoguchi and writing *Aura*, I found in an old bookshop in the Trastevere in Rome, where I had been led by the Spanish poets Rafael Alberti and María Teresa León, an Italian version of the Japanese tales of the *Togi Boko*, written by Hiosuishi Shoun and published in 1666. My surprise was quite great when I found there, written two hundred years before Akinari's tale and three hundred before Mizoguchi's film, the story called "The Courtesan Miyagino," where this same

narrative is told, but this time around with an ending that provides direct access to necrophilia.

The returning hero, a Ulysses with no heroism greater than a recovered capacity for forgetting, does not avail himself of a witch to recover his embodied desire, the courtesan Miyagino who swore to be faithful to him. This time he opens the tomb and finds his wife, dead for many years, as beautiful as the day he last saw her. Miyagino's ghost comes back to tell her bereaved husband this tale.

My curiosity was spurred by this story within the story of *Aura*, so I went back to Buñuel, who was now preparing the script for his film *The Milky Way*, reading through the 180 volumes of the Abbé Migne's treatise on patristics and medieval heresies at the National Library in Paris, and asked him to procure me right of entry into that bibliographical sanctuary, more difficult to penetrate, let me add, than the chastity of a fifteenth-century Japanese virgin or the cadaver of a courtesan of the same era and nationality.

Anglo-Saxon libraries, I note in passing, are open to all, and nothing is easier than finding a book on the shelves at Oxford or Harvard, at Princeton or Dartmouth, take it home, caress it, read it, take notes from it and return it. Nothing more difficult, on the contrary, than approaching a Latin library. The presumed reader is also a presumed kleptomaniac, a convicted firebug and a certified vandal: he who pursues a book in Paris, Rome, Madrid or Mexico City soon finds out that books are not to be read but to be locked up, become rare and perhaps serve as a feast for rats.

No wonder that Buñuel, in *The Exterminating Angel*, has an adulterous wife ask her lover, a dashing colonel, to meet her secretly in her library. What if the husband arrives? asks the cautious lover. And she answers: We'll tell him I was showing you my incunabula.

No wonder that Juan Goytisolo, when he invades a Spanish library in his *Count Julian*, fruitfully employs his time by squashing fat green flies between the pages of Lope de Vega and Azorín.

But let me return to that bibliographical Leavenworth which is the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris: Buñuel somehow smuggled me in and permitted me to grope in the dark, with fear of imminent discovery, for the ancestry of the Japanese tales of the *Togi Boko*, which in their turn were the forebears of Akinari's tales of the moon after the rain, which then inspired the film by Mizoguchi that I saw in Paris in the early days of September 1961, as I searched for the form and intention of *Aura*.

Is there a fatherless book, an orphan volume in this world? A book that is not the descendant of other books? A single leaf of a book that is not an offshoot of the great genealogical tree of mankind's literary imagination? Is there creation without tradition? But again, can tradition survive without renewal, a new creation, a new greening of the perennial tale?

I then discovered that the final source of this story was the Chinese tale called "The Biography of Ai-

King," part of the collection called the *Tsien teng sin hoa*.

Yet, could there conceivably be a "final source" for the story that I saw in a Parisian movie house, thinking I had found in Mizoguchi's dead bride the sister of my Aura, whose mother, I deceived myself, was an image of youth defeated by a very ancient light in an apartment on the Boulevard Raspail and whose father, deceitful as well, was an act of imagination and desire on crossing the threshold between the lobby and the bar of a house in Mexico City's Colonia del Valle?

Could I, could anyone, go beyond the "Biography of Ai'King" to the multiple sources, the myriad, bubbling springs in which this final tale lost itself: the traditions of the oldest Chinese literature, that tide of narrative centuries that hardly begins to murmur the vastness of its constant themes: the supernatural virgin, the fatal woman, the spectral bride, the couple reunited?

I then knew that my answer would have to be negative but that, simultaneously, what had happened did but confirm my original intention: Aura came into this world to increase the secular descent of witches.

FIVE, AT LEAST FIVE, WERE THE WITCHIES who consciously mothered Aura during those days of my initial draft in a café near the rue de Berri through which passed, more or less hurried and/or worried by the urgent, immediate events of this world, K. S. Karol the skeptical reporter, Jean Daniel the questioning journalist, and Françoise Giroud, the vibrant First Lady of the French press, all of them heading toward the pressroom of *L'Express*, the then great weekly that they made against bombs and censorship and with the close cooperation—it is hallucinatory to imagine it today—of Sartre and Camus, Mendès-France and Mauriac.

These five bearers of consolation and desire, I believe today, were the greedy Miss Bordereau of Henry James's *Aspern Papers*, who in her turn descends from the cruelly mad Miss Havisham of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, who is herself the English daughter of the ancient countess of Pushkin's *Queen of Spades*, she who jealously keeps the secret of winning at cards.

The similar structure of all three stories only proves that they all belong to the same mythical family. You invariably have three figures: the old woman, the young woman and the young man. In Pushkin, the old woman is the Countess Anna Fedorovna, the young woman her ward Lisaveta Ivanovna, the young man Hermann, an officer of the engineering corps. In Dickens, the old woman is Miss Havisham, the girl Stella, the hero Pip. In Henry James, the old woman is Miss Juliana Bordereau, the younger woman her niece Miss Tina, the intruding young man, the nameless narrator H.J.—"Henry James" in Michael Redgrave's staging of the story.

In all three works the intruding young man wishes to know the old lady's secret: the secret of fortune in

Pushkin, the secret of love in Dickens, the secret of poetry in James. The young girl is the deceiver—innocent or not—who must wrest the secret from the old woman before she takes it to the grave.

La señora Consuelo, Aura and Felipe Montero joined this illustrious company, but with a twist: Aura and Consuelo are *one*, and it is *they* who tear the secret of desire from Felipe's breast. The male is now the deceived. This is in itself a twist on machismo.

And do not all three ladies descend from Michelet's medieval sorceress who reserves for herself, be it at the price of death by fire, the secrets of a knowledge forbidden by modern reason, the damned papers, the letters stained by the sperm of candles long since gone dead, the cards wasted by the fingers of avarice and fear, but also the secrets of an antiquity projecting itself with greater strength than the future?

For is there a secret more secret, a scandal more ancient, than that of the sinless woman, the woman who does not incite toward sin—Eve—and does not open the box of disgrace—Pandora? The woman who is not what the Father of the Church, Tertulian, would have her be, "A temple built on top of a sewer," not the woman who must save herself by banging a door like Nora in Ibsen's *Doll's House*, but the woman who, before all of them, is the owner of her time because she is the owner of her will and of her body; because she does not admit any division between time, body and will and this mortally wounds the man who would like to divide his mind from his flesh in order to resemble, through his mind, his God, and through his flesh, his Devil?

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Adam rebukes the Creator, challenges him, asks him:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my Clay
To mould me Man, did I sollicite thee
From darkness to promote me, or here place
In this delicious Garden?

Adam asks his God, and even worse,

. . . to reduce me to my dust,
Desirous to resigne, and render back
All I receav'd, unable to performe
The terms too hard, by which I was to hold
The good I sought not.

This man divided between his divine thought and his carnal pain is the author of his own unbearable conflict when he demands, not death, but at least, because she is worse than death, life without Eve—that is, life without Evil, life among men only, a wise creation peopled by exclusively masculine spirits, without this fair defect of nature: woman.

But this life among masculine angels shall be a life alienated, mind and flesh separated. Seen as Eve or Pandora, woman answers from the other shore of this division, saying that she is one, body inseparable from soul, with no complaints against Creation, conceived without sin because the apple of Paradise does not kill: it nurtures and it saves us from the schizoid Eden

subverted by the difference between what is to be found in my divine head and what is to be found between my human legs.

The secret woman of James, Dickens, Pushkin and Michelet who finds her young granddaughter in Aura has, I said, a fifth forebear. Her name is Circe. She is the Goddess of Metamorphosis and for her there are no extremes, no divorces between flesh and mind, because everything is transforming itself constantly, everything is becoming other without losing its anteriority and announcing a promise that does not sacrifice anything of what we are because we have been and we shall be: "Ayer se fue, mañana no ha llegado, / Hoy se está yendo sin parar un punto; / Soy un fue, y un seré, y un es cansado" (Yesterday is gone, tomorrow has not come, / Today is endlessly fleeing; / I am an I was, an I shall be, an I am tired).

You shall move aside so that the light from the candles and the reflections from the silver and crystal reveal the silk coif that must cover a head of very white hair and frame a face so old it must be almost childlike. . . .

"I told you she'd come back."

"Who?"

"Aura. My companion. My niece."

"Good afternoon."

The girl will nod and at the same instant the old lady will imitate her gesture.

"This is Señor Montero. He's going to live with us."

SIX, ONLY SIX DAYS before her death, I met La Traviata. My wife Sylvia and I had been invited in September of 1976 to have dinner at the house of our old and dear friends Gabriella and Teddy van Zuylen, who have four daughters with the green eyes of Aura



FUENTES WITH DACIA MARAINI AND PIER PAOLO PASOLINI
LIDO BEACH, VENICE, AUGUST 1967

Imitating old Quevedo, I asked the *Aura* papers, feverishly written as the summer of '61 came to an end, "Listen life, will no one answer?" And the answer came in the night which accompanied the words written in the midst of the bustle of commerce and journalism and catering on a grand Parisian avenue: Felipe Montero, the false protagonist of *Aura*, answered me, addressing me familiarly:

You read the advertisement. Only your name is missing. You think you are Felipe Montero. You lie to yourself. You are You: You are Another. You are the Reader. You are what you Read. You shall be Aura. You were Consuelo.

"I'm Felipe Montero. I read your advertisement."

"Yes, I know. . . . Good. Please let me see your profile, . . . No, I can't see it well enough. Turn toward the light. That's right. . . ."

who spy on the guests near four paintings by Roberto Matta, Wifredo Lam, Alberto Gironella and Pierre Alechinsky, without anyone being able to tell whether the girls are coming in or out of the paintings.

"I have a surprise for you," said our hostess, and she sat me next to Maria Callas.

This woman made me shake violently, for no reason I could immediately discern. While we dined, I tried to speak to her at the same time that I spoke to myself. From the balcony of the Theatre of Fine Arts in Mexico City I had heard her sing *La Traviata* in 1951, when she was called Maria Mennighini Callas and appeared as a robust young woman with the freshest, most glorious voice that I had ever heard: Callas sang an aria the same way that Manolete fought a bull: incomparably. She was already a young myth.

I told her so that night in Paris. She interrupted me with a velocity at once velvet-smooth and razor-sharp in its intention: "What do you think of the myth now that you've met her?" she asked me.

"I think she has lost some weight," I dared to answer.

She laughed with a tone different from that of her speaking voice. I imagined that for Maria Callas crying and singing were acts nearer to song than to speech, because I must admit that her everyday voice was that of a girl from the less fashionable neighborhoods of New York City. Maria Callas had the speaking voice of a girl selling Maria Callas records at Sam Goody's on Sixth Avenue.

This was not the voice of Medea, the voice of Norma, the voice of the Lady of the Camelias. Yes, she had slimmed down, we all knew it, without losing her glorious and warm voice, the voice of the supreme diva. No: no one was a more beautiful woman, a better actress or a greater singer on an opera stage in the twentieth century.

Callas's seduction, let me add, was not only in the memory of her stage glory: this woman I now saw, thinned down not by her will but by her sickness and her time, nearer every minute to her bone, every second more transparent and tenuously allied to life, possessed a hypnotic secret that revealed itself as *attention*. I really think I have never met a woman who lent more attention to the man she was listening to than Maria Callas.

Her attention was a manner of dialogue. Through her eyes (two black lighthouses in a storm of white petals and wet olives) passed images in surprising mutation: her thoughts changed, the thoughts became images, yes, but only because she was transforming ceaselessly, as if her eyes were the balcony of an unfinished and endless opera that, in everyday life, prolonged in silence the suffused rumor, barely the echo, of the nights which had belonged to Lucia de Lamer-moor and Violetta Valéry.

In that instant I discovered the true origin of *Aura*: its anecdotal origin, if you will, but also its origin in desire, since desire is the port of embarkation as well as the final destiny of this novella. I had heard Maria Callas sing *La Traviata* in Mexico City when she and I were more or less the same age, twenty years old perhaps, and now we were meeting almost thirty years later and I was looking at a woman I had known before, but she saw in me a man she had just met that evening. She could not compare me to myself. I could: myself and her.

And in this comparison I discovered yet another voice, not the slightly vulgar voice of the highly intelligent woman seated at my right; not the voice of the singer who gave back to belcanto a life torn from the dead embrace of the museum; no, but the voice of old age and madness which, I then remembered (and confirmed it in the Angel record I went out hurriedly to buy the next morning), is the unbelievable, unfathom-

able, profoundly disturbing voice of Maria Callas in the death scene of *La Traviata*.

Whereas the sopranos who sing Verdi's opera usually search for a supreme pathos achieved thanks to agonizing tremors and attempt to approach death with sobs, screams and shudders, Maria Callas does something unusual: she transforms her voice into that of *an old woman* and gives that ancient voice the inflection of madness.

I remember it so well that I can almost imitate the final lines: "E strano! / Cessarono / Gli spasmi del dolore."

But if this be the voice of a hypochondriac old lady complaining of the inconveniences of advanced age, immediately Callas injects a mood of madness into the words of resurgent hope in the midst of a hopeless malady: "In mi rinasce—m'agita / Insolito vigore / Ah! Ma io ritorno a viver'." Only then does death, and nothing but death, defeat old age and madness with the exclamation of youth: "Oh gioia!"

Maria Callas invited Sylvia and me to see her again a few weeks later. But before that, one afternoon, *La Traviata* died forever. But before, also, she had given me my secret: *Aura* was born in that instant when Maria Callas identified, in the voice of one woman, youth as well as old age, life along with death, inseparable, convoking one another, the four, finally, youth, old age, life, death, women's names: "*La juventud*," "*la vejez*," "*la vida*," "*la muerte*."

SEVEN, yes, SEVEN DAYS were needed for divine creation: on the eighth day the human creature was born and her name was desire. After the death of Maria Callas, I reread *The Lady of the Camelias* by Alexander Dumas *fils*. The novel is far superior to Verdi's opera or to the numerous stage and film adaptations because it contains an element of delirious necrophilia absent from all the descendants.

The novel begins with the return to Paris of Armand Duval—A.D., certainly the double of Alexander Dumas—who then finds out that Marguerite Gautier had died. Marguerite Gautier, his lover lost through the suspicious will of Duval *père*, who says he is defending the family integrity by demanding that Marguerite abandon Armand, but who is probably envious of his son and would like Marguerite all for himself. Anyway, Duval *fils* desperately hurries to the woman's tomb in Père Lachaise. The scene that follows is surely the most delirious in matters of narrative necrophilia.

Armand obtains permission to exhume the body of Marguerite. The graveyard keeper tells Armand that it will not be difficult to find Marguerite's tomb. As soon as the relatives of the persons buried in the neighboring graves found out who she was, they protested and said there should be special real estate set apart for women such as she: a warehouse for the dead. Besides, every day someone sends her a bouquet of camelias. He is unknown. Armand is jealous of his dead lover: he does not know who sends her the flowers. Ah,

if only sin saved us from boredom, in life or in death! This is the first thing that Marguerite told Armand when she met him: "The companion of sick souls is called boredom." Armand is going to save Marguerite from the infinite boredom of being dead.

The gravediggers start working. A pickax strikes the crucifix on the coffin. The bier is slowly pulled out; the loose earth falls away. The boards groan frightfully. The gravediggers open the coffin with difficulty. The earth's humidity has made the hinges rusty.

At long last, they manage to raise the lid. They all cover their noses. All, save Armand, fall back.

A white shroud covers the body, revealing some sinuosities. One extreme of the shroud is eaten up and the dead woman's foot sticks out through a hole. Armand orders that the shroud be ripped apart. One of the gravediggers brusquely uncovers Marguerite's face.

The eyes are no more than two holes. The lips have vanished. The teeth remain white, bare, clenched. The long black tresses, dry, smeared onto the temples, cover up part of the green cavities on the cheeks.

Armand kneels down, takes the bony hand of Marguerite, and kisses it.

Only then does the novel begin: a novel that, inaugurated by death, can only culminate in death. The novel is the act of Armand Duval's desire to find the

object of desire: Marguerite's body. But since no desire is innocent—because we not only desire, we also desire to change what we desire once we obtain it—Armand Duval obtains the cadaver of Marguerite Gautier in order to transform it into literature, into *book*, into that second-person singular, the YOU that structures desire in *Aura*.

YOU: that word which is mine as it moves, ghostlike, in all the dimensions of space and time, even beyond death.

"You shall plunge your face, your open eyes, into Consuelo's silver-white hair, and she'll embrace you again when the clouds cover the moon, when you're both hidden again, when the memory of youth, of youth reembodyed, rules the darkness and disappears for some time.

"She'll come back, Felipe. We'll bring her back together. Let me recover my strength and I'll bring her back."

Felipe Montero, of course, is not You. You are *You*. Felipe Montero is only the author of *Terra Nostra*.

I published *Aura* in Spanish in 1962. The girl I had met as a child in Mexico and seen re-created by the light of Paris in 1961 when she was twenty, died by her own hand, two years ago, in Mexico, at age forty.

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