

Nobel Prize in Literature 1967



Miguel Angel Asturias

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1967 was awarded to Miguel Angel Asturias *"for his vivid literary achievement, deep-rooted in the national traits and traditions of Indian peoples of Latin America"*.

This year the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias, a prominent representative of the modern literature of Latin America, in which such interesting developments are now taking place. Born in 1899 in the capital of Guatemala, Asturias became imbued, even as a child, with the characteristically Guatemalan love of nature and of the mythical world. He devoted to this native heritage, and to its libertarian spirit, a fervour which was to dominate his whole literary production. After studying law and folklore, he lived in France during the twenties, and, for a time, represented his country in the diplomatic service. He condemned himself to a long exile after the anti-democratic coup d'etat of 1954, but returned when the legitimate regime took office again. He is presently the Guatemalan Ambassador in Paris.

During the last few years, Asturias has gained international recognition, as his most important works came to be translated into various languages; today they can be read even

in Swedish. His first work was a collection of Guatemalan legends, strange evocations of the Mayas' past, a treasure of images and symbols which has, ever since, been the inexhaustible source of his inspiration. But he did not get his real start as a writer until 1946, the year of the publication of the novel, *El Señor Presidente* (The President). This magnificent and tragic satire criticizes the prototype of the Latin American dictator who appeared in several places at the beginning of the century and has since reappeared, his existence being fostered by the mechanism of tyranny which, for the common man, makes every day a hell on earth. The passionate vigour with which Asturias evokes the terror and distrust which poisoned the social atmosphere of the time makes his work a challenge and an invaluable aesthetic gesture. The narrative, entitled, *Hombres de maíz* (Men of Maize) appeared three years later. It might be considered as a folktale whose chief inspiration is in the imagination but which, nevertheless, remains true to life. Its motifs are from the mythology of that tropical land where man must struggle simultaneously against a mysteriously beautiful but hostile nature and against unbearable social distortions, oppression, and tyranny. Such an accumulation of nightmares and totemic phantasms may overwhelm our sensibilities, but we cannot help being fascinated by a poetry so bizarre and terrifying.

With the trilogy of novels begun in 1950 - *Viente Fuerte*, 1950 (Strong Wind), *El Papa verde*, 1954 (The Green Pope), and *Los ojos de los enterrados*, 1960 (The Eyes of the Buried) - a new topical concern appears in Asturias's epic work: the theme of the struggle against the domination of American trusts, epitomized by the United Fruit Company, and its political and economic effects upon the contemporary history of the "Banana Republic". Here, again, we see the violent effervescence and the visionary vehemence which stem from the author's intense involvement in the situation of his country.

Asturias has completely freed himself from obsolete narrative techniques. Very early, he came under the influence of the new tendencies appearing in European literature; his explosive style bears a close kinship to French surrealism. It must be noted, however, that he always takes his inspiration from real life. In his impressive cycle of poems entitled *Clarivigilia primaveral*, 1965 (Bright and Awake in Spring), on which a Swedish critical

study has just appeared, Asturias deals with the very genesis of the arts and of poetic creation, in a language which seems to have assumed the bright splendour of the magical quetzal's feathers and the glimmering of phosphorescent insects.

Latin America today can boast an active group of prominent writers, a multivoiced chorus in which individual contributions are not readily discernible. Asturias's work is nevertheless vast, bold, and outstanding enough to arouse interest outside of his own literary milieu, beyond a geographically limited area situated far away from us. One of the Indian legends Asturias alludes to evokes the belief that dead ancestors are forced to witness, with open eyes, the struggles and sufferings of their offspring. Only when justice is re-established, and the stolen soil restituted, will the dead finally be able to close their eyes and sleep peacefully in their tombs. It is a beautiful and poignant popular belief, and we can easily imagine that the militant poet has often felt upon him the gaze of his ancestors and has often heard the silent, symbolic appeal reaching to his heart.

Mr. Ambassador - you come from a distant country, but do not let this fact make you feel today that you are a stranger among us. Your work is known and appreciated in Sweden. We take pleasure in welcoming you as a messenger from Latin America, its people, its spirit, and its future. I congratulate you in the name of the Swedish Academy, which pays tribute to the "vividness of your literary work, rooted in national traits and Indian traditions". I now invite you to receive your Prize from His Majesty, the King.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1967/press.html