

THE
LABYRINTH

OF
SOLITUDE

"Written in a lucid, rich prose, The Labyrinth of Solitude is Paz's poetic masterpiece." —Commonweal

OCTAVIO PAZ

Winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize for Literature

AND OTHER WRITINGS

The Labyrinth of Solitude

and The Other Mexico

Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude

Mexico and the United States

The Philanthropic Ogre

BY OCTAVIO PAZ

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY
Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash



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The other does not exist: this is rational faith, the incurable belief of human reason. Identity = reality, as if, in the end, everything must necessarily and absolutely be one and the same. But the other refuses to disappear; it subsists, it persists; it is the hard bone on which reason breaks its teeth. Abel Martín, with a poetic faith as human as rational faith, believed in the other, in "the essential Heterogeneity of being," in what might be called the incurable otherness from which oneness must always suffer.

—Antonio Machado

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PREFACE

This new edition of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* includes the new texts that complete the book and bring it up to date. First there is, under the title "Critique of the Pyramid," an essay written immediately after the bloody repression, in October 1968, of the student movement, which is at once a postscript and a revision of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Likewise included are three important essays: a dialogue with Claude Fell, the French critic, in which Mr. Paz revises, expands and rectifies his ideas on his country's history and culture; some thoughts on the peculiarities of the Mexican political system; and, lastly an original scrutiny that delves into the principles on which Mexico and the United States were founded and into the relations between the two countries.

The Labyrinth of Solitude

TRANSLATED BY LYSANDER KEMP

as they were before they were transformed by that elated sureness (of what: of life or of death?); they are the faces of coarse and humble people. But the memory will never leave me. Anyone who has looked Hope in the face will never forget it. He will search for it everywhere he goes, among all kinds of men. And he will dream of finding it again someday, somewhere, perhaps among those closest to him. In every man there is the possibility of his being — or, to be more exact, of his becoming once again — another man.

Mexican Masks

*Impassioned heart,
disguise your sorrow . . .*

—Popular song

The Mexican, whether young or old, *criollo* or *mestizo*,¹ general or laborer or lawyer, seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile. In his harsh solitude, which is both barbed and courteous, everything serves him as a defense: silence and words, politeness and disdain, irony and resignation. He is jealous of his own privacy and that of others, and he is afraid even to glance at his neighbor, because a mere glance can trigger the rage of these electrically charged spirits. He passes through life like a man who has been flayed; everything can hurt him, including words and the very suspicion of words. His language is full of reticences, of metaphors and allusions, of unfinished phrases, while his silence is full of tints, folds, thunderheads, sudden rainbows, indecipherable threats. Even in a quarrel he prefers veiled expressions to outright insults: "A word to the wise is sufficient." He builds a wall of indifference and remoteness between reality and himself, a wall that is no less impenetrable for being invisible. The Mexican is always remote, from the world and from other people. And also from himself.

The speech of our people reflects the extent to which we protect ourselves from the outside world: the ideal of manliness

¹*Criollo*: a person of pure Spanish blood living in the Americas. — Tr.
Mestizo: a person of mixed Spanish and Indian blood. — Tr.

is never to "crack," never to back down. Those who "open themselves up" are cowards. Unlike other people, we believe that opening oneself up is a weakness or a betrayal. The Mexican can bend, can bow humbly, can even stoop, but he cannot back down, that is, he cannot allow the outside world to penetrate his privacy. The man who backs down is not to be trusted, is a traitor or a person of doubtful loyalty; he babbles secrets and is incapable of confronting a dangerous situation. Women are inferior beings because, in submitting, they open themselves up. Their inferiority is constitutional and resides in their sex, their submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals.

Hermeticism is one of the several recourses of our suspicion and distrust. It shows that we instinctively regard the world around us to be dangerous. This reaction is justifiable if one considers what our history has been and the kind of society we have created. The harshness and hostility of our environment, and the hidden, indefinable threat that is always afloat in the air, oblige us to close ourselves in, like those plants that survive by storing up liquid within their spiny exteriors. But this attitude, legitimate enough in its origins, has become a mechanism that functions automatically. Our response to sympathy and tenderness is reserve, since we cannot tell whether those feelings are genuine or simulated. In addition, our masculine integrity is as much endangered by kindness as it is by hostility. Any opening in our defenses is a lessening of our manliness.

Our relationships with other men are always tinged with suspicion. Every time a Mexican confides in a friend or acquaintance, every time he opens himself up, it is an abdication. He dreads that the person in whom he has confided will scorn him. Therefore confidences result in dishonor, and they are as dangerous for the person to whom they are made as they are for the person who makes them. We do not drown ourselves, like

Narcissus, in the pool that reflects us; we try to stop it up instead. Our anger is prompted not only by the fear of being used by our confidants — that fear is common to everyone — but also by the shame of having renounced our solitude. To confide in others is to dispossess oneself; when we have confided in someone who is not worthy of it, we say, "I sold myself to So-and-so." That is, we have "cracked," have let someone into our fortress. The distance between one man and another, which creates mutual respect and mutual security, has disappeared. We are at the mercy of the intruder. What is worse, we have actually abdicated.

All these expressions reveal that the Mexican views life as combat. This attitude does not make him any different from anyone else in the modern world. For other people, however, the manly ideal consists in an open and aggressive fondness for combat, whereas we emphasize defensiveness, the readiness to repel any attack. The Mexican *macho* — the male — is a hermetic being, closed up in himself, capable of guarding both himself and whatever has been confided to him. Manliness is judged according to one's invulnerability to enemy arms or the impacts of the outside world. Stoicism is the most exalted of our military and political attributes. Our history is full of expressions and incidents that demonstrate the indifference of our heroes toward suffering or danger. We are taught from childhood to accept defeat with dignity, a conception that is certainly not ignoble. And if we are not all good stoics like Juárez and Cuauhtémoc, at least we can be resigned and patient and long-suffering. Resignation is one of our most popular virtues. We admire fortitude in the face of adversity more than the most brilliant triumph.

This predominance of the closed over the open manifests itself not only as impassivity and distrust, irony and suspicion,

but also as love for Form. Form surrounds and sets bounds to our privacy, limiting its excesses, curbing its explosions, isolating and preserving it. Both our Spanish and Indian heritages have influenced our fondness for ceremony, formulas, and order. A superficial examination of our history might suggest otherwise, but actually the Mexican aspires to create an orderly world regulated by clearly stated principles. The turbulence and rancor of our political struggles prove that juridical ideas play an important role in our public life. The Mexican also strives to be formal in his daily life, and his formalities are very apt to become formulas. This is not difficult to understand. Order — juridical, social, religious or artistic — brings security and stability, and a person has only to adjust to the models and principles that regulate life; he can express himself without resorting to the perpetual inventiveness demanded by a free society. Perhaps our traditionalism, which is one of the constants of our national character, giving coherence to our people and our history, results from our professed love for Form.

The ritual complications of our courtesy, the persistence of classical Humanism, our fondness for closed poetic forms (the sonnet and the *décima*, for example), our love for geometry in the decorative arts and for design and composition in painting, the poverty of our Romantic art compared with the excellence of our Baroque art, the formalism of our political institutions, and, finally, our dangerous inclination toward formalism, whether social, moral or bureaucratic, are further expressions of that tendency in our character. The Mexican not only does not open himself up to the outside world, he also refuses to emerge from himself, to "let himself go."

Sometimes Form chokes us. During the past century the liberals tried vainly to force the realities of the country into the strait jacket of the Constitution of 1857. The results were

the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and the Revolution of 1910. In a certain sense the history of Mexico, like that of every Mexican, is a struggle between the forms and formulas that have been imposed on us and the explosions with which our individuality avenges itself. Form has rarely been an original creation, an equilibrium arrived at through our instincts and desires rather than at their expense. On the contrary, our moral and juridical forms often conflict with our nature, preventing us from expressing ourselves and frustrating our true wishes.

Our devotion to Form, even when empty, can be seen throughout the history of Mexican art from pre-Conquest times to the present. Antonio Castro Leal, in his excellent study of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, shows how our reserved attitude toward Romanticism — which by definition is expansive and open — revealed itself as early as the seventeenth century, that is, before we were even aware of ourselves as a nation. Alarcón's contemporaries were right in accusing him of being an interloper, although they were referring more to his physical characteristics than to the singularity of his work. In effect, the most typical portions of his plays deny the values expressed by his Spanish contemporaries. And his negation contains in brief what Mexico has always opposed to Spain. His plays were an answer to Spanish vitality, which was affirmative and splendid in that epoch, expressing itself in a great Yes! to history and the passions. Lope de Vega exalted love, heroism, the superhuman, the incredible; Alarcón favored other virtues, more subtle and bourgeois: dignity, courtesy, a melancholy stoicism, a smiling modesty. Lope was very little interested in moral problems: he loved action, like all his contemporaries. Later, Calderón showed the same contempt for psychology. Moral conflicts and the hesitations and changes of the human soul were only metaphors in a theological drama whose two personae were Original

Sin and Divine Grace. In Alarcón's most representative plays, on the other hand, Heaven counts for little, as little as the passionate wind that sweeps away Lope's characters. The Mexican tells us that human beings are a mixture, that good and evil are subtly blended in their souls. He uses analysis rather than synthesis: the hero becomes a problem. In several of his comedies he takes up the question of lying. To what extent does a liar really lie? Is he really trying to deceive others? Is he not the first victim of his deceit, and the first to be deceived? The liar lies to himself, because he is afraid of himself. By discussing the problem of authenticity, Alarcón anticipated one of the constant themes of Mexican thinking, later taken up by Rodolfo Usigli in his play *The Gesticulator*.

Neither passion nor Grace triumph in Alarcón's world. Everything is subordinated to reason, or to reasonableness, and his archetypes are those of a morality that smiles and forgives. When he replaces the vital, Romantic values of Lope with the abstract values of a universal and reasonable morality, is he not evading us, tricking us? His negation, like that of his homeland, does not affirm our individuality vis-à-vis that of the Spaniards. The values that Alarcón postulates belong to all men and are a Greco-Roman inheritance as well as a prophecy of the bourgeois code. They do not express our nature or resolve our conflicts: they are Forms we have neither created nor suffered, are mere masks. Only in our own day have we been able to answer the Spanish Yes with a Mexican Yes rather than with an intellectual affirmation containing nothing of our individual selves. The Revolution, by discovering popular art, originated modern Mexican painting, and by discovering the Mexican language it created a new poetry.

While the Mexican tries to create closed worlds in his politics and in the arts, he wants modesty, prudence, and a ceremonious

reserve to rule over his everyday life. Modesty results from shame at one's own or another's nakedness, and with us it is an almost physical reflex. Nothing could be further from this attitude than that fear of the body which is characteristic of North American life. We are not afraid or ashamed of our bodies; we accept them as completely natural and we live physically with considerable gusto. It is the opposite of Puritanism. The body exists, and gives weight and shape to our existence. It causes us pain and it gives us pleasure; it is not a suit of clothes we are in the habit of wearing, not something apart from us: we are our bodies. But we are frightened by other people's glances, because the body reveals rather than hides our private selves. Therefore our modesty is a defense, like our courtesy's Great Wall of China or like the fences of organ-pipe cactus that separate the huts of our country people. This explains why prudence is the virtue we most admire in women, just as reserve is in men. Women too should defend their privacy.

No doubt an element of masculine vanity, the vanity of the "señor," of the lord or chieftain (it is an inheritance from both our Indian and Spanish ancestors), enters into our conception of feminine modesty. Like almost all other people, the Mexican considers woman to be an instrument, sometimes of masculine desires, sometimes of the ends assigned to her by morality, society and the law. It must be admitted that she has never been asked to consent to these ends and that she participates in their realization only passively, as a "repository" for certain values. Whether as prostitute, goddess, *grande dame* or mistress, woman transmits or preserves — but does not believe in — the values and energies entrusted to her by nature or society. In a world made in man's image, woman is only a reflection of masculine will and desire. When passive, she becomes a goddess, a beloved one, a being who embodies the ancient, stable elements

of the universe: the earth, motherhood, virginity. When active, she is always function and means, a receptacle and a channel. Womanhood, unlike manhood, is never an end in itself.

In other countries these functions are realized in public, often with something of a flair. There are countries that revere prostitutes or virgins, and countries that worship mothers; the *grande dame* is praised and respected almost everywhere. In contrast, we prefer these graces and virtues to be hidden. Woman should be secretive. She should confront the world with an impassive smile. She should be "decent" in the face of erotic excitements and "long-suffering" in the face of adversity. In either event her response is neither instinctive nor personal: it conforms to a general model, and it is the defensive and passive aspects of this model, as in the case of the *macho*, that are emphasized, in a gamut ranging from modesty and "decency" to stoicism, resignation and impassivity.

Our Spanish-Arabic inheritance is only a partial explanation of this conduct. The Spanish attitude toward women is very simple. It is expressed quite brutally and concisely in these two sayings: "A woman's place is in the home, with a broken leg" and "Between a female saint and a male saint, a wall of mortared stone." Woman is a domesticated wild animal, lecherous and sinful from birth, who must be subdued with a stick and guided by the "reins of religion." Therefore Spaniards consider other women — especially those of a race or religion different from their own — to be easy game. The Mexican considers woman to be a dark, secret and passive being. He does not attribute evil instincts to her; he even pretends that she does not have any. Or, to put it more exactly, her instincts are not her own but those of the species, because she is an incarnation of the life force, which is essentially impersonal. Thus it is impossible for her to have a personal, private life, for if she were to be herself

— if she were to be mistress of her own wishes, passions or whims — she would be unfaithful to herself. The Mexican, heir to the great pre-Columbian religions based on nature, is a good deal more pagan than the Spaniard, and does not condemn the natural world. Sexual love is not tinged with grief and horror in Mexico as it is in Spain. Instincts themselves are not dangerous; the danger lies in any personal, individual expression of them. And this brings us back to the idea of passivity: woman is never herself, whether lying stretched out or standing up straight, whether naked or fully clothed. She is an undifferentiated manifestation of life, a channel for the universal appetite. In this sense she has no desires of her own.

North Americans also claim that instincts and desires do not exist, but the basis of their pretense is different from ours, even the opposite of it. The North American hides or denies certain parts of his body and, more often, of his psyche: they are immoral, ergo they do not exist. By denying them he inhibits his spontaneity. The Mexican woman quite simply has no will of her own. Her body is asleep and only comes really alive when someone awakens her. She is an answer rather than a question, a vibrant and easily worked material that is shaped by the imagination and sensuality of the male. In other countries women are active, attempting to attract men through the agility of their minds or the seductivity of their bodies, but the Mexican woman has a sort of hieratic calm, a tranquillity made up of both hope and contempt. The man circles around her, courts her, sings to her, sets his horse (or his imagination) to performing caracoles for her pleasure. Meanwhile she remains behind the veil of her modesty and immobility. She is an idol, and like all idols she is mistress of magnetic forces whose efficacy increases as their source of transmission becomes more and more passive and secretive. There is a cosmic analogy here: woman

does not seek, she attracts, and the center of attraction is her hidden, passive sexuality. It is a secret and immobile sun.

The falsity of this conception is obvious enough when one considers the Mexican woman's sensitivity and restlessness, but at least it does not turn her into an object, a mere thing. She is a symbol, like all women, of the stability and continuity of the race. In addition to her cosmic significance she has an important social role, which is to see to it that law and order, piety and tenderness are predominant in everyday life. We will not allow anyone to be disrespectful to women, and although this is doubtless a universal notion, the Mexican carries it to its ultimate consequences. Thanks to woman, many of the asperities of "man-to-man" relationships are softened. Of course we should ask the Mexican woman for her own opinion, because this "respect" is often a hypocritical way of subjecting her and preventing her from expressing herself. Perhaps she would usually prefer to be treated with less "respect" (which anyway is granted to her only in public) and with greater freedom and truthfulness; that is, to be treated as a human being rather than as a symbol or function. But how can we agree to let her express herself when our whole way of life is a mask designed to hide our intimate feelings?

Despite her modesty and the vigilance of society, woman is always vulnerable. Her social situation — as the repository of honor, in the Spanish sense — and the misfortune of her "open" anatomy expose her to all kinds of dangers, against which neither personal morality nor masculine protection is sufficient. She is submissive and open by nature. But, through a compensation-mechanism that is easily explained, her natural frailty is made a virtue and the myth of the "long-suffering Mexican woman" is created. The idol — always vulnerable, always in process of transforming itself into a human being — becomes a victim, but

a victim hardened and insensible to suffering, bearing her tribulations in silence. (A "long-suffering" person is less sensitive to pain than a person whom adversity has hardly touched.) Through suffering, our women become like our men: invulnerable, impassive, and stoic.

It might be said that by turning what ought to be a cause for shame into a virtue, we are only trying to relieve our guilt feelings and cover up a cruel reality. This is true, but it is also true that in attributing to her the same invulnerability that we strive to achieve ourselves, we provide her with a moral immunity to shield her unfortunate anatomical openness. Thanks to suffering and her ability to endure it without protest, she transcends her condition and acquires the same attributes as men.

It is interesting to note that the image of the *mala mujer* — the "bad woman" — is almost always accompanied by the idea of aggressive activity. She is not passive like the "self-denying mother," the "waiting sweetheart," the hermetic idol: she comes and goes, she looks for men and then leaves them. Her extreme mobility, through a mechanism similar to that described above, renders her invulnerable. Activity and immodesty unite to petrify her soul. The *mala* is hard and impious and independent like the *macho*. In her own way she also transcends her physiological weakness and closes herself off from the world.

It is likewise significant that masculine homosexuality is regarded with a certain indulgence insofar as the active agent is concerned. The passive agent is an abject, degraded being. This ambiguous conception is made very clear in the word games or battles — full of obscene allusions and double meanings — that are so popular in Mexico City. Each of the speakers tries to humiliate his adversary with verbal traps and ingenious linguistic combinations, and the loser is the person who cannot think of a comeback, who has to swallow his opponent's jibes.

These jibes are full of aggressive sexual allusions; the loser is possessed, is violated, by the winner and the spectators laugh and sneer at him. Masculine homosexuality is tolerated, then, on condition that it consists in violating a passive agent. As with heterosexual relationships, the important thing is not to open oneself up and at the same time to break open one's opponent.

It seems to me that all of these attitudes, however different their sources, testify to the "closed" nature of our reactions to the world around us or to our fellows. But our mechanisms of defense and self-preservation are not enough, and therefore we make use of dissimulation, which is almost habitual with us. It does not increase our passivity; on the contrary, it demands an active inventiveness and must reshape itself from one moment to another. We tell lies for the mere pleasure of it, like all imaginative peoples, but we also tell lies to hide ourselves and to protect ourselves from intruders. Lying plays a decisive role in our daily lives, our politics, our love-affairs and our friendships, and since we attempt to deceive ourselves as well as others, our lies are brilliant and fertile, not like the gross inventions of other peoples. Lying is a tragic game in which we risk a part of our very selves. Hence it is pointless to denounce it.

The dissembler pretends to be someone he is not. His role requires constant improvisation, a steady forward progress across shifting sands. Every moment he must remake, re-create, modify the personage he is playing, until at last the moment arrives when reality and appearance, the lie and the truth, are one. At first the pretense is only a fabric of inventions intended to baffle our neighbors, but eventually it becomes a superior — because more artistic — form of reality. Our lies reflect both what we lack and what we desire, both what we are not and

what we would like to be. Through dissimulation we come closer to our model, and sometimes the gesticulator, as Usigli saw so profoundly, becomes one with his gestures and thus makes them authentic. The death of Professor Rubio changed him into what he wanted to be: General Rubio, a sincere revolutionary and a man capable of giving the stagnating Revolution a fresh impetus and purity. In the Usigli play Professor Rubio invents a new self and becomes a general, and his lie is so truthlike that the corrupt Navarro has no other course than to murder him, as if he were murdering his old commander, General Rubio, all over again. By killing him he kills the truth of the Revolution.

If we can arrive at authenticity by means of lies, an excess of sincerity can bring us to refined forms of lying. When we fall in love we open ourselves up and reveal our intimate feelings, because an ancient tradition requires that the man suffering from love display his wounds to the loved one. But in displaying them the lover transforms himself into an image, an object he presents for the loved one's — and his own — contemplation. He asks her to regard him with the same worshipful eyes with which he regards himself. And now the looks of others do not strip him naked; instead, they clothe him in piety. He has offered himself as a spectacle, asking the spectators to see him as he sees himself, and in so doing he has escaped from the game of love, has saved his true self by replacing it with an image.

Human relationships run the risk, in all lands and ages, of becoming equivocal. This is especially true of love. Narcissism and masochism are not exclusively Mexican traits, but it is notable how often our popular songs and sayings and our everyday behavior treat love as falsehood and betrayal. We almost always evade the perils of a naked relationship by exaggerating our feelings. At the same time, the combative nature of our

eroticism is emphasized and aggravated. Love is an attempt to penetrate another being, but it can only be realized if the surrender is mutual. It is always difficult to give oneself up; few persons anywhere ever succeed in doing so, and even fewer transcend the possessive stage to know love for what it actually is: a perpetual discovery, an immersion in the waters of reality, and an unending re-creation. The Mexican conceives of love as combat and conquest. It is not so much an attempt to penetrate reality by means of the body as it is to violate it. Therefore the image of the fortunate lover — derived, perhaps, from the Spanish Don Juan — is confused with that of the man who deliberately makes use of his feelings, real or invented, to win possession of a woman.

Dissimulation is an activity very much like that of actors in the theater, but the true actor surrenders himself to the role he is playing and embodies it fully, even though he sloughs it off again, like a snake its skin, when the final curtain comes down. The dissembler never surrenders or forgets himself, because he would no longer be dissembling if he became one with his image. But this fiction becomes an inseparable — and spurious — part of his nature. He is condemned to play his role throughout life, since the pact between himself and his impersonation cannot be broken except by death or sacrifice. The lie takes command of him and becomes the very foundation of his personality.

To simulate is to invent, or rather to counterfeit, and thus to evade our condition. Dissimulation requires greater subtlety: the person who dissimulates is not counterfeiting but attempting to become invisible, to pass unnoticed without renouncing his individuality. The Mexican excels at the dissimulation of his passions and himself. He is afraid of others' looks and there-

fore he withdraws, contracts, becomes a shadow, a phantasm, an echo. Instead of walking, he glides; instead of stating, he hints; instead of replying, he mumbles; instead of complaining, he smiles. Even when he sings he does so — unless he explodes, ripping open his breast — between clenched teeth and in a lowered voice, dissimulating his song:

*And so great is the tyranny
of this dissimulation
that although my heart swells
with profoundest longing,
there is challenge in my eyes
and resignation in my voice.*

Perhaps our habit of dissimulating originated in colonial times. The Indians and *mestizos* had to sing in a low voice, as in the poem by Alfonso Reyes, because "words of rebellion cannot be heard well from between clenched teeth." The colonial world has disappeared, but not the fear, the mistrust, the suspicion. And now we disguise not only our anger but also our tenderness. When our country people beg one's pardon, they say: "Pretend it never happened, señor." And we pretend. We dissimulate so eagerly that we almost cease to exist.

In its most radical forms dissimulation becomes mimicry. The Indian blends into the landscape until he is an indistinguishable part of the white wall against which he leans at twilight, of the dark earth on which he stretches out to rest at midday, of the silence that surrounds him. He disguises his human singularity to such an extent that he finally annihilates it and turns into a stone, a tree, a wall, silence, and space. I am not saying that he communes with the All like a pantheist, or that he sees an individual tree as an archetype of all trees, what I am saying is that he actually blends into specific objects

in a concrete and particular way.

Roger Caillouis has pointed out that mimicry is not always an attempt to foil the enemies that swarm in the outside world. Insects will sometimes "play dead" or imitate various kinds of decomposed material, out of a fascination for death, for the inertia of space. This fascination — I would call it life's gravitational force — is common to all living things, and the fact that it expresses itself in mimicry shows that we must consider it as something more than an instinctive device for escaping from danger or death.

Mimicry is a change of appearance rather than of nature, and it is significant that the chosen representation is either of death or of inert space. The act of spreading oneself out, of blending with space, of becoming space, is a way of rejecting appearances, but it is also a way of being nothing except Appearance. The Mexican is horrified by appearances, although his leaders profess to love them, and therefore he disguises himself to the point of blending into the objects that surround him. That is, he becomes mere Appearance because of his fear of appearances. He seems to be something other than what he is, and he even prefers to appear dead or nonexistent rather than to change, to open up his privacy. Dissimulation as mimicry, then, is one of the numerous manifestations of our hermeticism. The gesticulator resorts to a mask, and the rest of us wish to pass unnoticed. In either case we hide our true selves, and sometimes deny them. I remember the afternoon I heard a noise in the room next to mine, and asked loudly: "Who is in there?" I was answered by the voice of a servant who had recently come to us from her village: "No one, señor. I am."

We dissimulate in order to deceive ourselves, and turn transparent and phantasmal. But that is not the end of it: we also pretend that our fellow-man does not exist. This is not to say

that we deliberately ignore or discount him. Our dissimulation here is a great deal more radical: we change him from somebody into nobody, into nothingness. And this nothingness takes on its own individuality, with a recognizable face and figure, and suddenly becomes Nobody.

Don No One, who is Nobody's Spanish father, is able, well fed, well respected; he has a bank account, and speaks in a loud, self-assured voice. Don No One fills the world with his empty, garrulous presence. He is everywhere, and has friends everywhere. He is a banker, an ambassador, a businessman. He can be seen in all the salons, and is honored in Jamaica and Stockholm and London. He either holds office or wields influence, and his manner of not-being is aggressive and conceited. On the other hand, Nobody is quiet, timid, and resigned. He is also intelligent and sensitive. He always smiles. He always waits. When he wants to say something, he meets a wall of silence; when he greets someone, he meets a cold shoulder; when he pleads or weeps or cries out, his gestures and cries are lost in the emptiness created by Don No One's interminable chatter. Nobody is afraid not to exist: he vacillates, attempting now and then to become Somebody. Finally, in the midst of his useless gestures, he disappears into the limbo from which he emerged.

It would be a mistake to believe that others prevent him from existing. They simply dissimulate his existence and behave as if he did not exist. They nullify him, cancel him out, turn him to nothingness. It is futile for Nobody to talk, to publish books, to paint pictures, to stand on his head. Nobody is the blankness in our looks, the pauses in our conversations, the reserve in our silences. He is the name we always and inevitably forget, the eternal absentee, the guest we never invite, the emptiness we can never fill. He is an omission, and yet he is forever present. He is our secret, our crime, and our remorse. Thus the person who

creates Nobody, by denying Somebody's existence, is also changed into Nobody. And if we are all Nobody, then none of us exists. The circle is closed and the shadow of Nobody spreads out over our land, choking the Gesticulator and covering everything. Silence — the prehistoric silence, stronger than all the pyramids and sacrifices, all the churches and uprisings and popular songs — comes back to rule over Mexico.

The Day of the Dead

The solitary Mexican loves fiestas and public gatherings. Any occasion for getting together will serve, any pretext to stop the flow of time and commemorate men and events with festivals and ceremonies. We are a ritual people, and this characteristic enriches both our imaginations and our sensibilities, which are equally sharp and alert. The art of the fiesta has been debased almost everywhere else, but not in Mexico. There are few places in the world where it is possible to take part in a spectacle like our great religious fiestas with their violent primary colors, their bizarre costumes and dances, their fireworks and ceremonies, and their inexhaustible welter of surprises: the fruit, candy, toys and other objects sold on these days in the plazas and open-air markets.

Our calendar is crowded with fiestas. There are certain days when the whole country, from the most remote villages to the largest cities, prays, shouts, feasts, gets drunk and kills, in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe or Benito Juárez. Each year on the fifteenth of September, at eleven o'clock at night, we celebrate the fiesta of the *Grito*¹ in all the plazas of the Republic, and the excited crowds actually shout for a whole hour . . . the better, perhaps, to remain silent for the rest of the year. During the days before and after the twelfth of December,² time comes to a full stop, and instead of pushing us toward a deceptive tomor-

¹Padre Hidalgo's call-to-arms against Spain 1810. — *Tr.*

²Fiesta of the Virgin of Guadalupe. — *Tr.*