

The buried mirror

Carlos Fuentes *

On October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on a small island in the Western Hemisphere. Against all evidence, he had put his wager on a scientific hypothesis and won: since the earth is round, one can reach the East by sailing west. But he was wrong in his geography. He thought that he had arrived in Asia. His desire was to reach the fabled lands of Cipango (Japan) and Cathay (China), cutting short the route along the coast of Africa, south of the Cape of Good Hope and then east to the Indian Ocean and the Spice Islands.

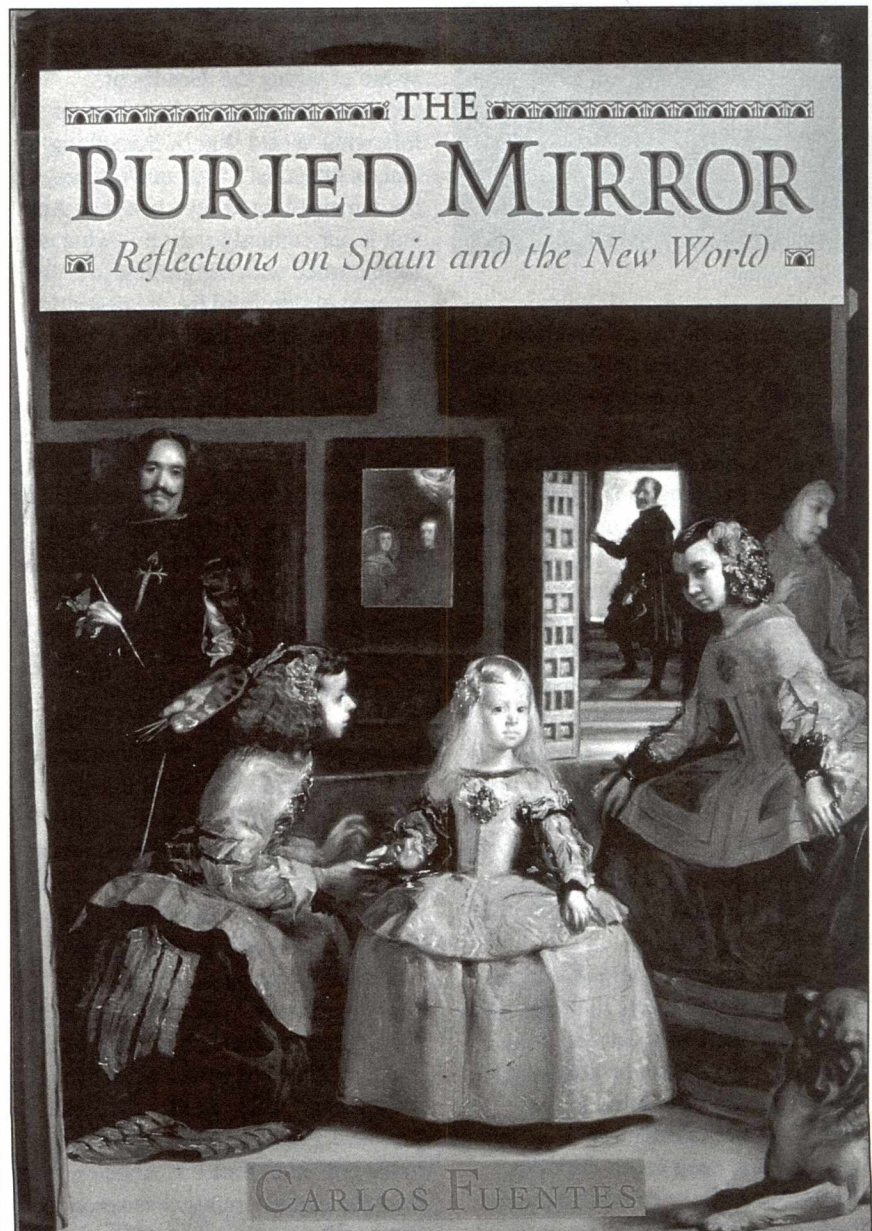
It was not the first or the last Occidental dis-Orientation. In these islands, which he called the Indies, Columbus established the first European settlements in the New World. He built the first churches, and the first Christian masses were celebrated there. Finding a domain empty of the Asian wealth that he had hoped for, he invented and reported back to Spain the discovery of great richness in forests, pearls, and gold. Otherwise, his patroness, Queen Isabella, might have thought that her investment (and her faith) in the highly inventive Genoese sailor had been misplaced.

More than offering gold, Columbus offered a vision of the Golden Age: these lands were Utopia,

the happy place of the natural man. He had come upon the earthly paradise and the noble savage. Why, then, was he immediately forced to deny his own discovery, attack the people he had so recently described

as “naked, unarmed and friendly,” hunt them down, enslave them, and even send them back to Spain in irons? In fact, young women who were taken prisoner in Cuba all died before they even reached Spain.

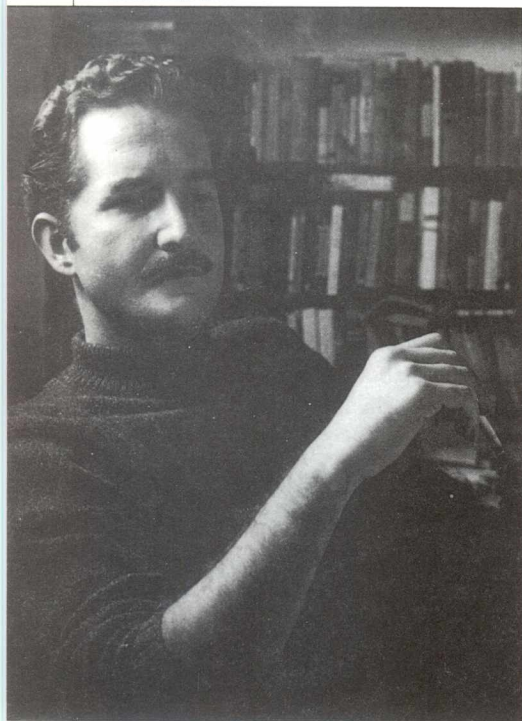
At first Columbus did step into the Golden Age. But very soon, through his own doing, the earthly paradise was destroyed and the formerly good savage was seen as to be ordered about and made to work, to sow and “to do aught else that may be



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Lola Alvarez Bravo.



Carlos Fuentes.

needed.” Ever since, the American continent has existed between dream and reality, in a divorce between the good society that we desire and the imperfect society in which we really live. We have clung to Utopia because we were founded as a Utopia, because the memory of the good society lies in our origins, and also at the end of the road, as the fulfillment of our hopes.

Five hundred years after Columbus, we are being asked to celebrate the quincentennial of his voyage—undoubtedly one of the great events of human history, a turn in events that heralded the arrival of the modern age. But many of us in the Spanish-speaking parts of the Americas wonder whether there is anything to celebrate.

A glance at the Latin American republics would lead us to reply in the negative. Whether in Caracas or in Mexico City, in Lima or in Buenos Aires, the fifth centennial of the “discovery of America” finds us in a state of deep, deep crisis. Inflation, unemployment, the excessive burden of foreign debt. Increasing poverty

and illiteracy; an abrupt decline of purchasing power and standards of living. A sense of frustration, of dashed hopes and lost illusions. Fragile democracies menaced by social explosion.

Yet I believe that in spite of all our economic and political troubles, we do have something to celebrate. The present crisis throughout Latin America demonstrates the vulnerability of our political and economic systems, which have come crashing down around our heads. But it has also revealed something that has remained standing, something that we were not acutely aware of during the decades of economic boom and political fervor following World War II. Something that, in the midst of our misfortunes, has remained on its own two feet. And that is our cultural heritage—what we have created with the greatest joy, the greatest gravity, and the greatest risk. This is the culture that we have been able to create during the past five hundred years, as descendants of Indians, blacks, and Europeans in the New World.

The crisis that has impoverished us has also put the wealth of our culture back in our own hands and forced us to realize that there is not a single Latin American, from the Rio Grande to Cape Horn, who is not an heir to each and every aspect of our cultural heritage. This is what I wish to explore in this book. It ranges from the stones of Chichén Itzá and Machu Picchu to modern Indian influences in painting and architecture. From the baroque art of the Colonial era to the contemporary literature of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. From the multifaceted European presence in Latin America—Iberian, and through Iberia Mediterranean, Roman, Greek, and also Arab and Jewish—to the singular and suffering black African presence. From the caves of Altamira to the graffiti in East Los Angeles. And from the earliest immigrants across the Bering Strait to the latest

undocumented workers crossing the U.S. border at Tijuana-San Diego.

Few cultures in the world possess a comparable richness and continuity. In it, we Spanish Americans can identify ourselves and our brothers and sisters on this continent. That is why we find it so striking that we have been unable to establish a comparable economic and political identity. I suspect that this has been so because all too often we have sought or imposed on ourselves models of development that are scarcely related to our cultural reality. For this reason, a rediscovery of cultural values can give us, with luck and effort, the necessary vision of cultural, economic, and political convergences. Perhaps this is our mission in the coming century.

This book is therefore dedicated to a search for the cultural continuity that can inform and transcend the economic and political disunity and fragmentation of the Hispanic world. The subject is both complex and polemical, and I will try to be evenhanded in dealing with it. But I shall also be passionate about it, because it concerns me intimately as a man, as a writer, and as a citizen, from Mexico, in Latin America, who writes in the Spanish language.

Searching for a guide through this divided night of the soul of the Hispanic world, I found it near the site of the ancient Totonac ruins at El Tajín, in Veracruz, Mexico. Veracruz is the native state of my family. Its capital has been the port of entry for change, and at the same time the abiding hearth of Mexican identity. Veracruz is a city that holds many mysteries. The Spanish, French, and North American conquerors have entered Mexico through it. But the oldest cultures—the Olmecs to the south of the port city, dating from 3,500 years ago, and the Totonacs to the north, 1,500 years old—are also rooted here.

In tombs surrounding the religious sites of these native peoples, mirrors have been found, buried,

ostensibly, to guide the dead through the underworld. Concave, opaque, polished, they contain the spark of light in the midst of darkness. But the buried mirror is not only an Amerindian occurrence. The Catalanian poet Ramón Xirau has titled a book of his *L'espil soterrat*, the buried mirror, recovering an ancient Mediterranean tradition not far removed from that of the ancient Amerindians. A mirror: looking from the Americas to the Mediterranean, and back. This is the very sense and rhythm of this book.

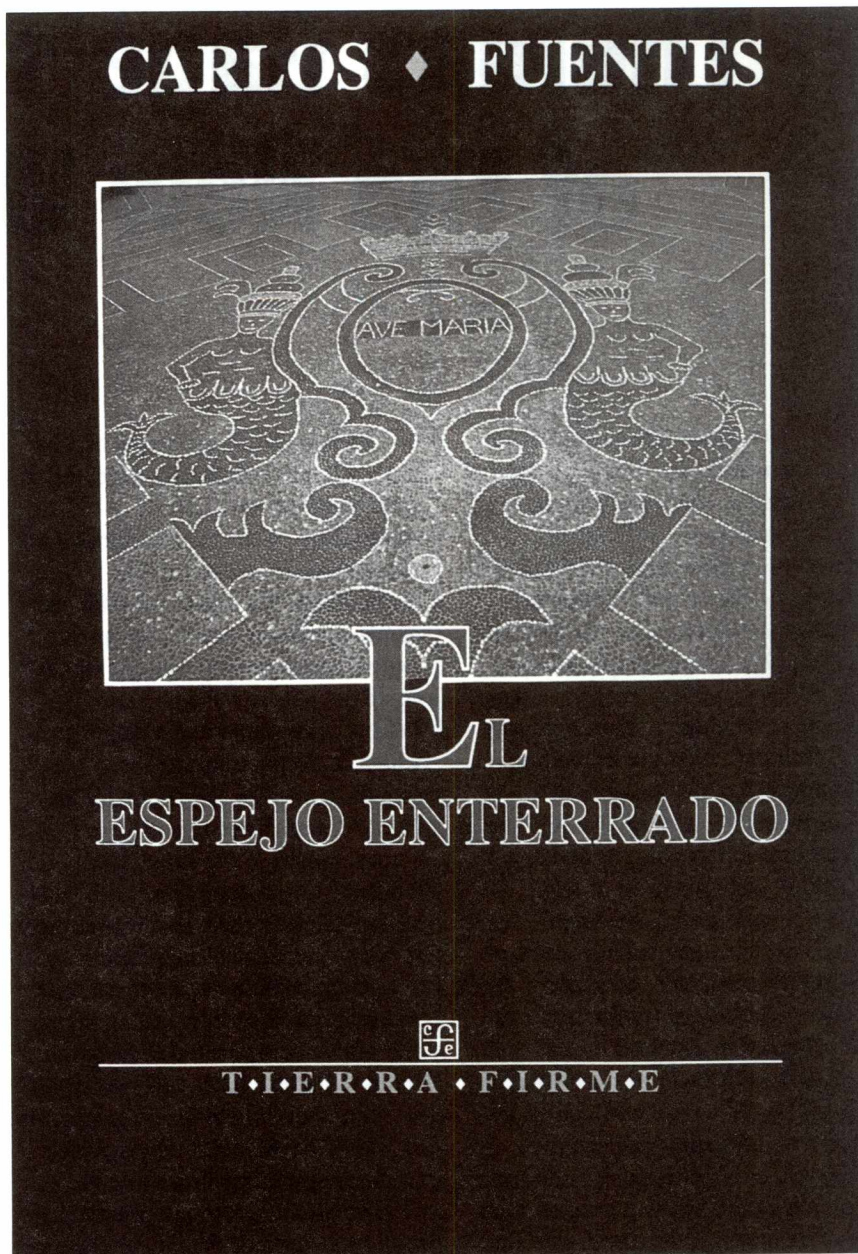
On this shore are the slate-black pyrite mirrors found at the pyramid of El Tajín, an astounding site whose name means "lightning." In its Pyramid of the Niches, rising 82 feet on a base of 115 square feet, 365 square windows open out, symbolizing, of course, the days of the solar year. Created in stone, El Tajín is a mirror of time.

On the other shore, Cervantes' Knight of the Mirrors does battle with Don Quixote, attempting to cure him of his madness. The old *hidalgo* has a mirror in his mind, reflecting everything that he has ever read, which, poor fool, he considers to be the truth.

Nearby, in the Prado Museum of Madrid hangs a painting by Velázquez in which he pictures himself painting what he is actually painting, as if he had created a mirror. But in the very depth of his canvas, yet another mirror reflects the true witnesses of the work of art: you and I.

Perhaps the mirror of Velázquez also reflects, on the Spanish shore, the smoking mirror of the Toltec god of night, Tezcatlipoca, as he visits the god of peace and creativity, Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, to offer him the gift of the mirror. On seeing himself reflected, Quetzalcoatl identifies himself with humanity, and falls, terrified.

Does he find his true nature, both human and divine, in the House of Mirrors, the circular temple of the



Toltec pyramid at Teotihuacan, or in the cruel social mirror of Goya's *Caprichos*, where vanity is debunked and human society cannot deceive itself as it gazes into the mirror of truth? You thought you were a dandy? Look, you are truly a monkey.

Mirrors symbolize reality, the sun, the earth, and its four corners, its surface, its depths, and all of its peoples. Buried in caches throughout the Americas, they also cling to the bodies of the humblest celebrators in

the Peruvian highlands or in the Mexican Indian carnivals. As the people dance, with scissors hanging from their legs and arms and bits and pieces of mirrors embedded in their headdresses, they now reflect the world, salvaging this reflection of their identity, which is more precious than the gold they gave Europe in exchange.

Are they not right? Is not the mirror both a reflection of reality and a projection of the imagination? ❧