1965

Juan Rulfo: Contemporary Mexican Novelist

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The current of regionalism, once a tidal flow, though somewhat diminished lately, continues to run strong in our literature. A lot of what it hauls along is old-fashioned stuff of little more than pictoric interest. The old regionalists who started producing the bulk of our literature toward the end of the nineteenth century were mediators between man and nature. Their function was less literary than agricultural. Their eye was innocent: it alighted only on surfaces. There was a wilderness to be tamed, an unmarked land to be given man’s image and imprint. There were remnants of tribal cultures to be explored, catastrophes to be recorded. Literature was part of a collective effort.

Social conflicts—in feudal fiefs, mines, tropical plantations—gave this literature urgency and momentum. A branch of it, perhaps the sturdiest, taking its cue from the venerable Alcides Arguedas, who denounced the exploitation of the Indian in the Bolivian highlands in his epochal Raza de Bronce (Race of Bronze, 1919), found its cause in protest. Another, eminently represented today in the work of Peru’s José María Arguedas, a fine sociologist, subordinated the epic to the interpretive. A third, the least fruitful—one thinks of El Salvador’s juicy humorist, Salarrué—petered out into folklore. But whatever the emphasis, the basic characteristics of this literature were always the same. It gave a picture, not a portrait. Its lines were general and usually at once roughly drawn and overly stylized. It had poetic moments in Peru’s Ciro Alegria, a pleasant truculence in Salarrué, a militant force in Ecuador’s Jorge Icaza. It became experimental with Mexico’s Agustín Yañez, highly expressive with José María Arguedas, and even rose to mythological altitudes with Guatemala’s Miguel Ángel Asturias, who eclipsed all his contemporaries in the genre. Recently it has had new life breathed into it by a talented Paraguayan storyteller, Augusto Roa Bastos, an excellent stylist who has known how to make regional lit-
erature carry the cross of human suffering with grace and dignity.

On the whole, regionalists today are literate writers. Their work has reached an acceptable level of achievement. But, in spite of subtle refinements in methods and techniques—which never transcend basic limitations—they are essentially in the old pamphleteering tradition. They still tend toward either the tract or the travelogue. They work from set situations which, needless to say, are often as real today as they were fifty years ago, but from a literary point of view have long been exhausted. Their faceless characters, sometimes colorful enough, but rarely more than silhouettes with a few generic traits, are soon forgotten. The stress they put on local dialect helps their work date fast. There are few exceptions. Perhaps the only one is Mexico's Juan Rulfo.

Rulfo, a thin man with a lean look, was born on May 16, 1918, in a rocky land: the state of Jalisco, some three hundred miles, as the wind blows, northwest of Mexico City. The northern part of the state, where mountain goats cling to high ledges, is densely populated, but his area, extending south of the capital, Guadalajara, is dry, hot and desolate. Life in the lowlands has always been austere. It is a depressed area long gutted by droughts and wildfires. Revolutions, crop failures, soil erosion have gradually displaced the population. Much of it has moved to Tijuana in hopes of finding migrant work across the border. It is a population largely made up of hardy Creoles—the Indians who occupied the region before the Conquest were soon exterminated—who trace their ancestry back to Castille and Extremadura, the more arid parts of Spain, and are therefore, as Rulfo says, “accustomed to work ten times harder than the farmer of central Mexico to produce the same.” They are a dour people reduced to a bare subsistence, who have nevertheless given the country a high percentage of its painters and composers, not to mention its popular music. Jalisco is the cradle of the ranchera and the mariachi.

Says Rulfo in his sorrowful voice: “It's a very poor state: But the people work a lot. They produce a lot. I don’t know how they manage to produce so much. They produce too much. Jalisco is the state that produces the most corn in the whole country. It’s not a very large state. I think it’s the eighth state in size in the country. But it produces enough corn to feed the whole of Mexico. It has more cattle than any other state. But as soon as you leave the capital, there’s a lot of misery. Corn is a great destroyer of the soil. So there’s no good soil left. In some areas it’s completely worn out.”
He sits hunched in his chair in our hotel room, off the clattering Paseo de la Reforma. The lines of his gaunt face are drawn tight, his long hands with big veins like raw nerves awkwardly folded on his lap. He talks quickly, in nervous haste, frowning painfully. He is what is known in his land as a “slow starter,” he says, like one of those rifles with delayed action that often backfire. He is like his land: prematurely aged, deeply furrowed, careworn. There are blanks in his past. Rugged terrain fades into a hazy background.

“I was born in what is now a small village, an agglomeration that belongs to the district of Sayula. Sayula was an important commercial center some years ago, before and even after the Revolution. But I never lived in Sayula. I don’t know Sayula. I couldn’t say what it’s like. . . . My parents registered me there. Because I was born at the time of the Revolution, or rather, of the revolutions, because there were a series of them. . . . I lived in a village called San Gabriel. I really consider myself to be from there. That’s where I was brought up. San Gabriel was also a commercial center. In the old days, San Gabriel was a prosperous town; the royal road to Colima passed through there.” San Gabriel was on the highway that led inland from Manzanillo, the port of entry used in Colonial times for imports from the Orient; in its heyday, there was such wealth that the stores were measured by the number of doors they had. “San Gabriel and Zapotitlan were the most important towns of the region from the seventeenth century down to the Revolution.” They were first settled under the “encomenderos”: usually soldiers who were granted lands by the Crown in reward for their services, with the local population thrown into the bargain. These “encomenderos” concentrated the population into a few main urban centers that were relatively easy to administer. That was how San Gabriel and Zapotitlan were formed, also Tolimán, Tonaya, Chachahuatlán, San Pedro, etc. But that was long ago. Since the Revolution, there have been years of sunstroke. Nowadays, “in that zone, there are five or six villages left. They are hot lands, between 2,500 and 3,000 feet high.” Changing trade routes, desert winds, have swept them into decay. There is little hope of improvement. The process is irreversible. Some villages still seem alive; but on closer inspection, nothing is going on there any more. The few superannuated inhabitants are stolid and tightlipped. “They are a hermetic people. Perhaps out of distrust—not only toward strangers, but also among themselves. They don’t want to talk about their things. Nobody knows what they do, how they make a living. There are villages devoted exclusively to graft. The people there
don't like to be asked any questions. They settle their affairs in their own private and personal way, almost secretly. . . ." The landscape itself—forty-five per cent of Mexico is sheer desert—is decrepit. The living are surrounded by the dead.

The dead haunt Rulfo. Perhaps because like so many people of his antediluvian region he has been uprooted and has lost his tracks in the sand. He remembers how his childhood village was gradually depopulated. "There was a river. We used to go bathe there in the hot season. Now the river has run dry. . . ." One of the reasons why the water no longer flows is that the woods in the surrounding mountains—which enclose the area in a monolithic horseshoe—have been cut down. Most people have migrated. Those who have stayed behind are there to keep the dead company. "Their ancestors tie them to the place. They don't want to leave their dead." Sometimes when they move they actually dig up their graves. "They carry their dead on their shoulders." Even when they leave them behind, they continue to bear their weight.

So with Rulfo, whose ancestry seems remote, therefore perhaps doubly cumbersome. He has also dug up old family graves in search of his lost origins. "My first ancestor came to Mexico around 1790, I think, from the north of Spain." "Historical curiosity" has sent him browsing, usually in vain, through libraries, bank vaults and civil registries. Mexico is a country of missing files and misplaced documents. Particularly his area, which is buried in administrative confusion. "It was an area that didn't belong to Jalisco originally. Jalisco was called Nueva Galicia. It was conquered by Núñez de Guzmán in 1530. But my area was called the province of Ávalos. Because it was conquered by Alonso de Ávalos, the man who pacified Colima and the southern part of Jalisco. The province of Ávalos was part of Nueva España, in other words, of Mexico City, the capital of the vice-royalty. Though it was near Guadalajara, the capital of Nueva Galicia, it had no political or religious connections with Guadalajara. For many years the documentation of the province of Ávalos was lost, because most of those villages were decimated by plagues and fevers, sometimes by the Conquerors themselves. One of my ancestors on my mother's side was called Arias. . . . There's a curious fact here. Most of the Spanish conquerors were adventurers, jailbirds: monks who weren't monks, priests who weren't priests, people with criminal records. They gave themselves names that don't exist. For example: Vizcaíno. I'm called Vizcaíno on my mother's side. But Vizcaíno is a name that doesn't exist in Spain. There's the province of Vizcaya. Here the name of the province was used to coin a surname. In
other words, all the Vizcaínos were outlaws. It was very common among those gentlemen to change their name. They dropped their patronymic and named themselves after their province instead. That's where genealogy breaks down.” The diagnosis holds good for most families of “high birth” in Mexico today, he says. If you trace them back far enough, you invariably end up with either a priest or a criminal. “That’s why ‘highborn’ dynasties are false, formed entirely on the basis of wealth. It’s hard to draw the lines here. In Ávalos it’s impossible. There the villages were razed by the Revolution; the archives were burned. The only documents available were copies on file in Mexico City. So it was difficult to get down to the bottom of things. Now, many facts can be found in banks in the U.S. Because the expeditionary forces that occupied California set out from Ávalos. So the banks there have collected the documents of the period for their own information. They have the best files. Because it was a chapter in the history of California, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.” Rulfo has carried his search to all those places.

What he knows about his family is that his paternal grandfather was a lawyer, his maternal grandfather a landowner. His parents were from the more densely populated northern part of the state, known as Los Altos (The Heights). “It’s an overpopulated, very eroded zone inhabited by people who started moving south around the turn of the century. How my parents reached the south, I don’t know. The highlander, besides being from the highlands, is tall. ‘Longback,’ people call him, because of his long waist.” Rulfo inherited this trait. He wears his trousers low on slim hips. He also has light eyes. They are common in his region, where the countrygirls are often blonde and blue-eyed. They are also poor. They go barefoot. “There were never any big landholdings in that area. There were always small properties. The countryside people have always been very poor. The only time they put on their shoes is when they go into town. . . . The habits in those villages are still matriarchal. There woman commands. As a matter of fact, the power of the matriarchy made itself felt during the revolt of the Cristeros. It was the women who led the revolt.”

The hardships of the time—starting around 1926, under President Calles, a centralizer who tried to impose constitutional uniformity on the country—are one of Rulfo’s childhood memories.

“The revolt of the Cristeros was an internal war that broke out in the states of Colima, Jalisco, Michoacán, Magarit, Zacatecas and Guanajuato, against the federal government. There was a decree that enforced
an article of the Revolution, according to which priests were forbidden to mix in politics and the churches became the property of the state, as they are today. A set number of priests was assigned to each village, in accordance with its population. Of course, people protested. Those are very reactionary, very conservative villages—fanatics. There was a lot of conflict and agitation. The war, which was born in the highlands, in the state of Guanajuato, lasted three years, until 1928.” By then it had extended to Rulfo’s area. In the very first days of the war, he lost his father. Six years later, he lost his mother. He had been sent to Guadalajara to study at the age of eight, and when she died he was taken in by French Josephine nuns, who ran schools in almost all the important towns of Jalisco. He had relatives in Guadalajara: “the Rulfos, a very prolific family, especially on the female side.” But somehow no one seems to have claimed him. His grandparents were all dead, except for a maternal grandmother—an old lady descended from “an Arias family that had come to settle in the area in the sixteenth century, probably from Andalucía”—who was illiterate.

Rulfo remembers the orphanage as a sort of reform school. He boarded there for several years. He says softly, lowering his eyes: “That’s very common in Mexico. Still today many people in remote villages who want to educate their children and have no one to entrust them to, send them to boarding schools.”

Perhaps closer to his true feelings is that line in one of his stories where he might well be evoking the loneliness of the orphanage when he says, with typical understatement: “It’s difficult to grow up trying to cling to something which is dead at the root.”

It was a hard struggle for the melancholy country boy transplanted among the relative splendors of a pseudometropolitan Guadalajara, a stiff-necked town with aristocratic pretensions which was actually, as he says, little more than an outpost of provincial snobbery living off the frayed remnants of its colonial pride. After grade school, hoping to become self-supporting, Rulfo went into accountancy. Accountants always managed to make a living, even in the most run-down times. But soon he had to cut corners. “With a cousin of mine, one of the Vizcaínos, I’d just gotten into high school when a general strike was declared. The university closed down for about three years.” To continue his interrupted studies, Rulfo moved to Mexico City. That was in 1933, when he was fifteen years old.

What the first months or years must have been like in the bustling capital for an impoverished youngster without friends or connections, is
something Rulfo does not talk about. But they left their mark on him. It was an itinerant life of odd jobs, always hand to mouth. Besides accountancy, Rulfo studied some law—"very irregularly." In his free time, he attended literature courses at the university. In 1935 he landed a job with the Immigration Department—an obscure, but therefore, presumably, more or less safe, bureaucratic post that he occupied for ten years. It was no sinecure. When the Second World War broke out, with Mexico keeping to the sidelines, but nevertheless sympathizing with the Allied cause, he helped process the crews of impounded refugee boats—mostly tankers—of Nazi Germany. The boats were docked in Tampico and Veracruz, and the crews, which were treated more or less as war prisoners, were interned in military camps in the interior, often near Guadalajara, which became a great center of foreigners. It was unpleasant work, and in 1947, glad to be done with it, he switched to publicity work with Goodrich. He was in the sales department there until 1954. In 1955 he was with the Papaloapan Commission, formed to implement an irrigation program near Veracruz. It was a pet project of President Miguel Aleman, who aspired to create a sort of Mexican TVA in the region. On a river with a seasonal overflow that swept away local villages, the Commission built a power center. It plotted highways. But, because of mismanagement and lack of funds, the ambitious project failed. Back in Mexico City in 1956, Rulfo helped himself along doing scripts and adaptations for commercial movies. He had hopes that something of value could be done in the medium. But that was another chimera. "The result was not too positive," he says, shrugging. In 1959 another change occurred. He worked in TV in Guadalajara. With the backing of the new Televicentro, which subsidized his effort, he began compiling yearbooks of historical illustrations that were another attempt to piece together the missing evidence of the past. "The thing is, in Guadalajara the only cultural activity is a bank, the Industrial Bank of Jalisco, which publishes a history book every year as a gift to its clients. So I had an idea: to try to incorporate the whole history of Jalisco from the days of the early chronicles, and bring it out regularly, once a year, as before, in book form. To make up for the poison people were being fed on television, they'd be given a book." It was worth a try. Nowadays—on a job he has held since 1962—Rulfo works at the Instituto Indigenista (Indian Institute), an organization devoted to the task of protecting and integrating primitive Indian communities bypassed by progress, which has pushed them to the fringes of Mexican life, where they become fodder for political agitators. It is tiring and
depressing work that keeps him constantly on the move. He disappears for days at a time on some lonely mission into the misty backlands, and returns looking haggard, as if back from a lost weekend. Every trip is an added blow to him. On off-days, he sits humped over his desk in his antiseptic office on an upper floor of the Institute, starting every time the phone rings anywhere in the building and reaching for the receiver next to him as if the call were always for him. He is forever under the pressures of waiting. At any moment he might jump up and vanish. Around him are glass walls that shake and clatter as workers bang away, in the hall. When no one is looking, he slips out of the office like a shadow, rides the elevator down in silent concentration, and ducks around a street corner. Visitors who catch him on the way out, suddenly unavoidable, become honored guests. He makes an endless bustle, opening doors and pulling out chairs for them. He is excruciatingly shy, gazing out of frightened eyes at his guests. Installed at his desk in his dark suit, kneading his nervous hands, looking perpetually worried and disoriented, he is like a harried village priest at the end of a long day, sighing in the solitude of his confessional. On those rare evenings when he has time to devote to his writing, he floats out into the thin mountain air, full of whispers that drive him to the penitence of night-long work. Though of medium height, his stoop makes him seem slight: a wisp of a man on a devious course through the shifting colors of night-fall, to a hard labor that may yield a few finished lines or simply become a sleepless cramp. He writes very little—his reputation rests on two books—probably because of some monumental block in him. Perhaps his life is not his own. Somewhere along the line—he was married in 1948, and lives in a house with many children—it fused with the life of his country, beat fast when the pulse was strong, then stopped with it. He says: "Stability in Mexico is deadlock. We’ve come to a complete standstill."

On a late afternoon in June, after hunting him down for a week, at home and at work, only to keep losing track of him—he has been called away, he is unavailable, he breaks an appointment—we finally meet him in the lobby of our hotel, where he arrives in trepidation, with a long shadowy face and darting eyes. He is late—by several hours—he has been held up, and is dismally embarrassed. Upstairs he sits in a low chair, staring at the floor. He is ready to make for the door. He has a thousand things to do. Besides his missions for the Institute, he has been working on an experimental film with a theme of social protest. He describes it as a series of sketches interspersed with Vivaldi music,
perhaps not unlike Buñuel's famous *Las Hurdes*. Overcoming his shyness, he wanders off on a meek man's compulsive monologue, stringing disconnected thoughts together, touching on everything and nothing, then falling into a tongue-tied silence. Again and again the conversation trails off. We are in a state of suspended animation. "I only know how to express myself in a very rudimentary way," he says with a gentle smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes.

He is a man who does not quite know how he came to literature—a somewhat belated vocation with him—except that one day he simply woke up in it. Perhaps the one to blame for this is the village priest of San Gabriel, back in the days of the wars of the Cristeros. For a time, Rulfo stayed on a family farm with his grandmother, a pious lady who could hardly read anything outside her prayer book, which he suspects she recited from memory—she had once tried to go on a pilgrimage to Rome to see the Pope—but whose house contained a small library belonging to the local parish. The priest had left it there in safekeeping when the government troops turned his house into an army barracks. The Rulfo household was under federal protection, because Rulfo's mother was related by marriage to one of the colonels serving against the Cristeros. Rulfo had the books all to himself. "So I read all of them." Most of them, he says, were not Biblical texts but adventure stories. They made his thoughts run ahead of him. He has been trying to keep up ever since.

But it was not until many years later, about 1940, in the solitude of the big city, that Rulfo first put pen to paper. He produced a fat novel—which he later destroyed—about life in Mexico City. "It was a conventional sort of book, very high-strung, but at bottom no more than an attempt to express certain solitary feelings. Maybe that's why it came out so high-strung. It wasn't convincing. But that was just it. The fact that I wrote it at all seems to mean I was trying to find a way out of the solitude I'd been living in, not only in Mexico City, but for many years, since my days in the orphanage."

He describes the book as having been written in "a somewhat rhetorical language that I was perfectly well aware of myself. That wasn't the way I wanted to say things. So, practising ways to free myself of all that rhetoric and bombast, I started cutting down, working with simpler characters. Of course I went over to the opposite extreme, into complete simplicity. But that was because I was using characters like the countrypeople of Jalisco, who speak a pure brand of sixteenth-century Spanish. Their vocabulary is very spare. In fact, they practically don't
The result was his first story, "La vida no es muy seria en sus cosas" (Life Is Not To Be Taken Too Seriously), published in 1942 in a Guadalajaran magazine called Pan. Limiting his scope, withdrawing within the starkness of personal memory, he seemed to have found his way. In 1945 he published his now-famous story, "Nos han dado la tierra" (The Land They Gave Us). The stories of the next few years, a meager but vintage crop, were collected in 1953 under the title of one of them, *El Llano en Llamas* (The Plain on Fire). Between 1953 and 1954, on a Rockefeller grant—during his work on the Papaloapan project—he wrote *Pedro Páramo*, which appeared in 1955 (Grove Press, 1960).

**Rulfo's brief and bright course** has been one of the wonders of our literature. He has not blazed any new trails; to the contrary, he has been content to tread along traditional paths. But his footsteps go deep. He writes about what he knows and feels, with the simple passion of a man of the land come into contact with elemental things: love, death, hope, hunger, violence. With him, regional literature loses its pamphleteering militance, its folklore. Experience is not filtered through the prism of civilized prejudice. It is laid out straight, with cruel candor. Rulfo is a man attuned to the primitive poetry of desert landscapes, dusty sunlit villages, seasonal droughts and floods, the humble joys of the harvest, the hard labor of poor lives lived out always close to plague and famine. His language is as frugal as the world, reduced almost to pure heartbeat. He has no message. He sings the swan song of blighted regions gangrened by age, where misery has opened wounds that burn like bright sores under an eternal midday sun, where a pestilent fate has turned areas that were once rolling meadows and grasslands into fetid open graves. He is a stoic who does not inveigh against treachery and injustice, but suffers them in silence as part of the epidemic of life. His theme is simply human sorrow in dispossession. He writes with a sharp edge, carving each word out of hard rock, like an inscription on a tombstone. Therefore his work glows with a lapidary purity. It is written in blood.

"So much land, for nothing," says one of the characters in *El Llano en Llamas*, gazing around him at the desolate expanses stretching out of sight in the sweltering haze. And that sets the tone of the book. Its impressionistic sketches—it would be stretching a point in some cases to call him stories—are quick glimpses into the soul of ruin. They are not all related in time or space. But the same spirit inhabits them all. The region, generally, is that of southwestern Jalisco, extending roughly...
from Lake Chapala, west through Zacoalco to Ayutla and Talpa, and south through Sayula and Mazamitla toward the border that separates Jalisco from the states of Colima and Michoacán. Armed bands laid the area waste during the Revolution. Then, as the population straggled back, there was the revolt of the Cristeros, during which there was "a sort of resettlement. The army concentrated people in ranch houses and villages. When the fighting got more intense, the people were moved from the villages to larger towns. So the land was abandoned. People looked for work elsewhere. After a few years, they didn't return any more." The agrarian reform was no help. It was very disorganized. "The land was distributed among small tradesmen instead of farmers. It was given to the carpenters, bricklayers, barbers, shoemakers. They were the only ones that formed a community. To form a community, you needed twenty-five people. All those twenty-five people had to do was get together and ask for the land. The countryside people never asked for it. The proof is that until this day they have no land. The farm worker was accustomed to being entirely dependent on the landowner he served. He was a tenant farmer who had his land on loan, cultivated it, and paid for it with half his yearly crop." The confusion favored real estate speculation. There has been no change for the better in recent years. Today the small farmers of Jalisco "have nothing to live from any more. They barely survive. They go down to the coast looking for work, or cross the U.S. border as day laborers. They come back in the rainy season to plow some little plot of land at home. But their children leave as soon as they can." There is no hope for these regions, says Rulfo. They are slated for disaster. Forty or fifty per cent of the population of Tijuana comes from there. Families are numerous, with a minimum of ten children. The only industry is mezcal, the plant from which the tequila is taken. Significantly, there is a town called Tequila, northwest of Guadalajara. The mezcal and the maguey—source of an alcoholic beverage called pulque—are classical products of impoverished lands on the road to disintegration.

Rulfo mourns these lands. El Llano en Llamas is a quiet funeral oration to an area that is breathing its last. A pall of doom hangs in the air like a heavy storm cloud. The rule is resignation. A rough courage under a habitually apathetic surface flares up in intermittent spurts of violence and brutality: savage banditry, predatory blood feuds. It is an area of hunted men and deserted women where "the dead carry more weight than the living. "If there's nothing to be done, there's nothing to be done," people say, bowing their heads, awaiting the relief of death. Be-
cause that is their only firm faith, their last illusion, that "some day the night will come" and peace along with it, as they are laid to rest among immemorial shadows in the darkness of the grave.

The trials begin with childhood, as in "Es que somos muy pobres" (We Are Very Poor), where a young girl, whose older sisters, determined to wring what pleasure they can out of their destitution, have gone the way of all flesh, is, in turn, fated for perdition as her hopes of marriage vanish when her poor dowry—a cow and a calf—is swept away in a flood. Even bleaker is the lot of the child in "Macario": an orphan boy brought up in an inhospitable foster home, whose sole comfort is being breast fed by a kind cook turned wet nurse, whose milk tastes of daffodils. Macario lives under the threatening shadow of his foster mother, who wags a chill finger at him, promising him hell for his misconduct. To please her—she is a neurotic insomniac—he spends his time killing frogs in a nearby pond—their croaks keep her awake—and cockroaches in the house. Gnawed by obscure pangs that the author pinpoints in vivid images, he has seizures, hears the drums of fairs pounding in the street and beats his head against the floor. With a kind of quiet sadistic glee, he mashes bugs underfoot, littering the house with them. He spares only crickets which, according to an old wives' tale, chirp to cover the laments of souls in Purgatory.

The dark urges that propel people to their undoing are portrayed in "Acuerdate" (Remember), a brief sketch of a village type, a young dandy who suddenly, for no known reason, turns bad, to become a criminal and a renegade. He wants to go straight. He tries his luck as a policeman, then thinks of priesthood. But a blind force leads him on to violence, until at last he is hanged from a tree that, in a final act of free will allowed him by an ironic fate, he selects himself.

The Revolution, says Rulfo, unleashed passions that have become habits in some of these villages. Though on the whole, crime has moved toward the coast lately, certain towns in Jalisco still live from it. It is a business and a way of life. A case of this is the story, "La cuesta de las comadres" (Gossips' Slope), told casually, by a lackadaisical narrator, with the nonchalance of a people for whom death is always close and life has little value. A marauding gang of bandits and cattle rustlers—the Torricos—terrorizes the fertile slope of small lots that gives the story its title. It is one of those places where time has taken its toll. Over the years the population, driven by those nameless illusions that haunt all of Rulfo's characters, has disbanded. Partly to blame for the
exodus are the Torricos. The narrator knows them well. He once went stealing bales of sugar with them, and nearly left his skin behind. Later, because Remigio Torrico accuses him of having murdered his brother, Odilón, who was actually killed in a brawl in town (in self-defense—he is being threatened with a machete), he kills Remigio by coolly sticking a baling needle in his ribs. All this is told in a matter-of-fact tone that adds a sinister thrill to the story. The setting is the no-man’s-land around Zapotlán. The most grisly things happen in those places, says Rufio. “A while back, in Tolimán, they were digging up the dead. No one knew exactly why or what for. It happened in stages, cyclically....” A scar on the landscape may turn out to be an open sewer. “Among those villages, there’s one called El Chantle, which is full of outlaws. There’s no authority there. Even government troops stay away from the place. It’s a town of escaped convicts. You see that kind of people elsewhere, too. As a rule, they’re the calmest people in the world. They carry no arms, because they’ve been disarmed. You talk to them and they seem completely harmless. They’re very peaceful, usually a bit sly, never quite on the level, but at the same time, without any bad intentions. Yet behind each of those men there may be a long list of crimes. So you never know who you’re dealing with, whether with a gunman for a local warlord or an ordinary farmer.” Often the forces of order are no more enlightened than the delinquents they track down.

In “La noche que lo dejaron solo” (The Night He Was Left Alone), we have a fugitive from justice doggedly stalked day and night by shadowy pursuers, who mop up his whole family. Stumbling home to his hut at night, through the smoke of a bonfire, he sees the corpses of his two uncles dangling from a tree in the corral. Troops are gathered around the corpses, waiting for him. As he blunders off into the brush to splash headlong across a river, he hears a voice say with savage logic: “If he doesn’t get here before tomorrow morning, we’ll knock off the first man that comes this way, that’ll settle accounts.”

Another man pursued is the protagonist of “El hombre” (The Man), whose flight sends him over horizon after horizon, carrying the weight of his guilt. He is a killer who has done away with a whole family. Shifting points of view throw light on his agony, foreshadowing techniques used later to fine effect in Pedro Páramo. The first part of the story is told objectively, in two times: one corresponding to the perceptions of the pursued, the other to those of the pursuer. Halfway through there is a switch to a first person narrator—the fugitive—then
later to the point of view of a witness: a shepherd testifying before local police authorities. All are flighty figures with fickle gestures, flickers of life that soon fade in the vastness of the plain.

In the land of the damned no one is to blame for his follies, and yet everybody is guilty. For even stripped of their humanity, men continue to pay for it. The guilt may be nameless, but no less onerous for that, as in “En la madrugada” (At Dawn), where a farmhand is thrown into prison, accused of having killed his master in a fight, and, though he remembers nothing, he says to himself, almost with exultance: “Since I’m in jail, there must be a reason for it;” or it may be very precise and specific, as in “Talpa,” where an adulterous pair—man and sister-in-law—take the deceived husband, who has been afflicted with the plague, on a long pilgrimage to the Virgin of Talpa, whom they hope to reach “before she runs out of miracles.” The trip has a double intent. The sick man is a burden to them; they know that the bone-wearying trip will make him die faster. And so it happens. On the way, their charge, perhaps not unaware of their designs—which they are only half aware of themselves—becomes a sort of martyr and flagellant. In a fit of blind fervor, he rips his feet on boulders, bandages his eyes, then drags himself along on all fours, wearing a crown of thorns. His pain is also their suffering; it dramatizes a common predicament. When he dies, his survivors are not acquitted of their sin. Their love dies with him.

Guilt is again a major time in “Diles que no me maten” (Tell Them Not To Kill Me), a story of vengeance. An old crime, which time has not repealed, catches up with the protagonist, who is tied to a stake by the son of a man he murdered years before, given a few shots of alcohol in a moment of wry compassion to dull the pain, then summarily executed. But he might just as well have been spared. A lifelong fear of retribution has already made him die a thousand deaths before that. There is a streak of humor in his end. The bullets pumped into him settle accounts many times over. They are really nothing but so many coups de grace on a corpse.

Grief is strife. Physical poverty is moral indigence. It spreads its mortal fumes into even the most intimate recesses of personal life, polluting love, undermining trust and friendship. This is the topic of “No oyes ladran los perros” (Don’t You Hear The Dogs Bark), which traces the footsteps of a beleaguered father who carries his wounded son into town to see the doctor, heaping reproaches on him along the way. In Rulfo there is almost always bitterness and recrimination between parents and children; they fail each other even in helping each other. What
one generation can transmit to the next is little more than an age-old impotence. The young, eternally disinherited, are cast defenseless into the world, to suffer the long agony of life. Those who have nerve and fiber make good. The others wither away, or become miscreants. "Your children leave you...they thank you for nothing...they drain you even of your memory." Relations between man and woman are no happier than those between parents and children. In "Paso del norte" (Northern Pass) we have the story of a young man who leaves his family to cross the U.S. border as a wetback. He is met by a hail of bullets. He returns to his village in defeat, only to find that his woman has left him. Abandoning his children, he vanishes after her, destined from then on to roam the country like a soul in pain.

There are always those who, in their own wretched way, thrive on the ills of others. A case in point are the roving bandits of the title story, who sack ranches and set fields on fire as they go galloping across the plain, chased by government forces that never seem to catch up with them, or misfire when they do. They are the verminous Zamora band who, "although we have no flag to fight for at the moment," keep fit slitting throats and hoarding booty. The leader plays "bull" with his prisoners, who are made to stand unarmed as he charges them with a sword. They derail trains and steal women. Bad luck has the narrator serve a term in jail, from which he emerges a somewhat chastened man. Perhaps a woman who awaits him with open arms—in a somewhat sentimental ending—outside the prison gate will save him. But the chances are that he will ride again. Or he might find some other way to scrape by, as Anacleto Morones, in the story of the same name, which reveals Rulfo as a biting ironist. Anacleto, a mere derelict, makes a thriving career for himself as a "santero"—peddler of religious images—combining high salesmanship with religious quackery. He builds a fine reputation, and rakes in the profits. Among his worshipping supporters are a bunch of hypocritical old hags who have succumbed to his charm in more ways than one. He has become the "saintly child Anacleto." The women want him officially canonized, appeal to Lucas Lucatero, his son-in-law, to testify to his miracles. Ambushed by them, Lucas Lucatero refuses to cooperate: Anacleto was a fraud. His greatest miracle, it turns out, was impregnating his own daughter, Lucas' wife. Lucas has killed him and buried him under the floorboards.

Perhaps, all things considered, Lucas Lucatero, and Anacleto himself, were once no worse than the honest peasants of the moving "Nos han dado la tierra," which still stands as one of Rulfo's best stories.
With a sort of impersonal pity that makes the tale doubly poignant, he tells of a group of men allotted lands in a barren desert region under a government distribution program. They are sent far from the fertile fields bordering the river, which have all been commandeered by powerful landlords. The group, now reduced to four men, has trekked for eleven hours, with sinking hearts, across the empty wasteland, out of which “nothing will rise... not even vultures.”

Yet life goes on. “It is more difficult to revive the dead than to give birth to new life,” Rulfo writes somewhere, summing up the general attitude. In this faint hope, scant lives find a driving force. Tapping it at the source has been Rulfo’s achievement. His sketches are quick probes. It is the small touches that count. He has weaknesses as a storyteller. Excessive poetization freezes some of his scenes. His characters are sometimes too sketchy to deliver their full human impact. They are creatures of primeval passion, entirely defined by their situation. Because of their lack of inner resource, ultimately they inspire little more than pity. And that is the danger. We are often on the verge of falling into pathos. But the attentive reader will go beyond that. There is something more—still waters running deep. To live, in Rulfo, is to bleed to death. The pulse of the days beats hard, carrying off hope, gutting life at the core, spilling forces, emptying illusions. He can evoke the fatigue of a long day’s march across barren spaces in a quiet phrase: “It seems to me that we’ve gone a lot farther than the distance we’ve covered,” or a lifetime’s inexpressible distress and longing in the voice of a woman who says of her absent man: “It’s still time for him to return.” Of the mother who has lost all her children, he writes simply: “It seems she had a little money, but spent it all on burials.” It is the ability to suddenly close in and strike home that at moments gives Rulfo the dignity of a tragedian. His style is as stark as his landscapes. Its marks are discipline and economy. Its impact is cumulative. It has the pull of irresistible impulse.

One of the most characteristic stories of El Llano en Llamas is “Luvina,” the name of a village on a limestone hill, laboring under its obscure curse, in an area swept by a dusty black wind that seems to carry volcanic ash. It is a “moribund place where even the dogs have died.” Like the once fertile slope in “La cuesta de las comadres,” it is a ghost town on its way to extinction. “I’d say it’s the place where sadness nests, where smiles are unknown, as if everyone’s face had been boarded up,” says the narrator, an ex-resident, warning a traveler away from it. He ought to know: “There I lived. There I left my life.” Nowadays
Luvina is populated only by "the old and the unborn... and lonely women." Those who have stayed are retained only by their dead. "They live here and we can't abandon them," they say. They will continue to sweat out their sentence, thinking: "It will last as long as it has to last."

Which is more or less the outlook of the inhabitants of Comala in Pedro Páramo, where the living, if there are any, are indistinguishable from the dead. Comala is a dreary place, hardly more than a dip in the landscape, but for those trapped there, a burning pit set "on the hot coals of the earth, in the very mouth of hell." There flesh and blood have either petrified, or evaporated. Only a shadow life remains, made of dwindling figures on otherworldly errands who turn out to be the lost souls of the departed.

Pedro Páramo is the story of a local caudillo, a classical specimen of the breed, whose unrequited life is reconstructed in groping retrospect from whispers, hearsay, rumors and other debris of his passing through this world by his wayfaring son, Juan Preciado. Juan Preciado, full of vague illusions, in search of a lost childhood, returns to Comala after an absence of many years, fulfilling a promise he made to his mother on her deathbed. He is there to collect her memories, perhaps to plumb his own past. We recognize a variant of the Mexican myth of the illegitimate child, born of rape, eternally in quest of his unknown father.

Juan Preciado finds a deserted village—there is a real village that goes by that name just south of the Jaliscan border, near Colima—made of voices and echoes. A dusty road leads down into the village. From a muleteer he meets along the way—Abundio, a natural son fathered by the caudillo, therefore Juan Preciado's step-brother—he learns that Pedro Páramo is already dead. So, it will soon dawn on him, is everyone else, including himself. It is August, midsummer, a time of blazing heat. He wanders in a kind of sickly gloom. His encounters all turn out to be ghosts or delusions. These villages, says Rulfo, are like graveyards, dedicated to the cult of death. A Christian respect for the dead has mixed with pagan ancestor-worship. There are certain days of the year, for instance—the first days of October—when the dead are said to return to haunt the living. "There's the idea that those who die in sin are doomed to roam upon the face of the earth." They are the souls in pain who find no peace. Soon Juan Preciado feels that his head is "full of sounds and voices." He is actually telling the story from the next world. His passing—or awakening to the fact that he has passed—is recorded halfway through the book. He is found in the street one day, cramped...
and clammy, as if he had literally been frightened to death. Which was just what happened. “He was killed by murmurs,” a voice says. From his tomb, deep underground, listening to the restless stirrings of the dead, he continues to piece together the story of Pedro Páramo.

The time is around the turn of the century, the eve of revolutionary disruption. The rise and fall of Pedro Páramo has the elements of a case history. The setting, Jaliscan in general contours, is meant, says Rulfo, to be more represented in factual accuracy than in insight. “I’ve been all over Mexico and I’ve seen some tremendous personal fiefs in the state of Guerrero and other parts of the country. If I located Pedro Páramo in Jalisco, it was simply because that’s what I know best. I have the unfortunate tendency to place certain imaginary characters in specific geographic surroundings. I like to give the atmosphere of a place.”

Who is Pedro Páramo?

He is not the absentee landlord who ruled northern Mexico, where the Revolution started. This type of landlord had huge properties, resided in the capital, leaving his lands, which he had often never laid eyes on, in the hands of an administrator, and educated his children in Europe. Pedro Páramo, on the other hand, “is the prototype of the medium-sized landowner there used to be in Jalisco, a man who lives on his lands and works them himself. He is not above plowing and planting side by side with his men.” But that makes him no less rapacious in his lust for absolute power over the region he commands.

Out of the twilight of collective memory, a sharp figure gradually takes shape. Back in the old days, Pedro Páramo inherited the considerable property known as the Media Luna (Half Moon) from his father, Don Lucas, who was murdered by a farmhand, leaving his son full of hate and rancor for the community, which soon learned to dread him. Pedro Páramo, until then simply a young gay blade, driven by his grudge and ambition, takes the reins firmly in hand. Following a period of violent reprisals and consolidating power, Pedro Páramo buys or chases out his neighbors, forging deeds and bills of sale, moving boundaries and, when the occasion calls for it, resorting to every degree of force and violence. Don Lucas left many debts which he does not intend to settle. A shyster lawyer in his pay helps him finagle things to his advantage. His largest creditors are a group of sisters called Preciado. Pedro Páramo decides to marry one of them, Dolores, who has been pining for him. Dolores never has a chance. Pedro Páramo is in a hurry. Through the good offices of Fulgor Sedano, his overseer and right-hand-
man, a smooth negotiator, she is persuaded to accept him at once, even though the moon is “unfavorable”—she is having her period—according to the local witch doctor. Pedro Páramo, no man to respect others’ feelings, barrels on. All this Juan Preciado, Dolores’ son, learns from the dream-figure of Eduviges Dyada, a close childhood friend of his mother, who recalls in the silence of the tomb how she—who also loved Pedro Páramo—substituted in bed for Dolores at the crucial moment to help her through her wedding night. Which did not prevent Dolores, trampled, and soon stranded, by Pedro Páramo, from picking up shortly after that and leaving town forever.

Meantime the Media Luna flourishes. There are emergencies. One day the harbingers of the Revolution arrive. There are rumors that Pancho Villa is in the area. Then come the Cristeros. But, typically, Pedro Páramo finds a winning compromise each time. He “joins” the Revolution to save his own skin. He invites the rebels over, promises them money and supplies, then sends one of his trusted henchmen, Damasio, off with some men to fight in their ranks and keep an eye on them. The plan costs him nothing. He does not even have to support his troops. They plunder neighboring ranches, thus even in destruction ultimately favoring the interests of the boss of the Media Luna.

But not for long. The first blow strikes with the death of the apple of his eye, his troublemaking son, Miguel, a bad sort who has already killed a man at the age of seventeen and sampled half the girls in the neighborhood. Only his father’s influence keeps him out of prison. Until finally, on his way home one day at dawn from one of his nightly forages, he meets his fate when he is thrown from his horse. It is somehow the beginning of the end for Pedro Páramo. With clear foresight, he realizes at once what he is in for. “I’m starting to pay. Better to start early, in order to finish soon,” he says, suddenly, in misfortune, rising to full stature. In the view of Miguel laid out for burial he senses his own approaching downfall. “He seems bigger than he was,” he says wistfully.

In the end, what undoes Pedro Páramo is the same thing that undoes everyone else in Rulfo: illusion. In his case, it is his impossible love for Susana San Juan, “a woman not of this world.” Susana was a childhood playmate with whom he bathed naked in country streams and flew kites in the windy season. Susana—an airy image he carries in him forever as an aftertaste of lost innocence, a yearning for impossible fulfillment—is a strange girl, a sort of Ophelia, brittle and sensual, always on the dim edge of sanity. She has visions and nightmares. She lost her
mother young, was then traumatized by her father, Bartolomé San Juan, a wishful-thinking miner in search of buried treasure with whom she has an equivocal relation. Once he lowered her dangling at the end of a rope into the nether regions under the floorboards to pick up what he thought was a gold nugget, only to have her find a skeleton. To worsen matters, in her teens she loved Florencio, of whose warm embraces she has been dreaming ever since. He was murdered by orders of Pedro Páramo. Widowed, she has lived with her lonely father, who took her away to a mining town to forget. The incestuous climate he creates around her, says Rulfo, is his way of trying to reach her, to bring her back to reality. We are dangerously close to the psychoanalytic cliché of childhood trauma. But nothing definite is said. There are only “threads” of suggestion and allusion. After a lapse of thirty years, thoroughly broken, the old man accepts lodging with Pedro Páramo, who in exchange demands the hand of his daughter. He is signing his own death sentence. Susana becomes his wife. But in name only. Her feverish spells worsen. She tosses in bed at night, calling for Florencio. When she dies, tormented by the local priest—a picker of the dead—Pedro Páramo, distraught, has the church bells in Comala ring for three solid days. But nothing can bring her back. To precipitate matters, the bells create a sort of holiday atmosphere in town. Whereupon, in revenge, Pedro Páramo decides: “I’ll cross my arms and Comala will starve to death.” And so it happens. He burns his possessions, neglects his lands, and spends the rest of his days staring up the road along which Susana was taken to the cemetery. The inner drama—such as it is—has its outer equivalences. Rivers dry up. People leave. It is as if the very existence of Comala depended entirely on the will of a single man. The power of the caudillo had given the area a cohesion and stability of sorts. Now there is a complete breakdown. The spirit has simply gone out of the place. Says Rulfo: “It’s really the story of a town that dies out on its own. Not because of anything or anyone.” It simply ages and wears out. Pedro Páramo embodies the general sense of inner fatality. Tired, disillusioned, he waits for death. It comes the day Abundio, the muleteer, suddenly becomes an avenging angel, drunk after his own wife’s death for which he obscurely blames Pedro Páramo, and sticks a knife in him. For Pedro Páramo it is a moment of final plenitude. “This is my death,” he says with fruition, greeting it as an old friend.

Such is the general line of the story. But its intentions lie beyond mere chronology. Pedro Páramo is a face in a broken mirror, an image
gradually composing on the surface of troubled waters. A whisper here, a hint there, float him up out of the wreckage. The picture is given in shifting panels, bits of speech suddenly overheard, a rumor blown out of a doorway. All around him, in secret confabulation, are babbling voices and vanishing specters. Says Rulfo, never quite sure how he manages to do what he does: “I imagined the character. I saw him. Then, wondering how to handle him, I logically thought of a ghost town. And, of course, the dead live outside space and time. That gave me freedom to do what I wanted with the characters. I could have them come in, then simply fade out.” There is a sort of telepathy at work. The reader intuits the hidden course of the narrative. The treatment of characters and events is strictly phenomenological; we are in a world of effects without causes, shadows without substance. Again, as in Rulfo’s stories, it is often the small details that fix a scene: a quick impression, a twist of the tongue. There are vivid minor characters: the local priest, Padre Rentería, whose obsequiousness before the powerful, who patronize his church, turns his apostolate into a hollow mockery. Denied absolution by his confessor, he prays in pantomime, invoking a long rosary of saints that ripple through his mind as if they were sheep jumping over a fence. There is the tremulous Eduviges with her cobwebbed memories; an incestuous brother and sister who lodge Juan Preciado one evening; the psychosomatic Dorothea, who suffers from some obscure qualm of conscience over what may have been an imaginary pregnancy or an aborted baby, we are never sure which of the two, though it is clear that she is irretrievably damned in any case in her role as procuress for Miguel Páramo.

Pedro Páramo has its shortcomings. There is a typically Mexican mother figure languishing in the background. Whenever her image is evoked, we hover on the edge of the maudlin. Then, why not say it, the figure of Pedro Páramo himself is an old standard. The clipped style, the oblique focus, do not alter the fact that basically we are going over familiar grounds. The characterization is too slight—and conventional—to add anything new to the theme of the local despot. Pedro Páramo’s overpowering instinctual drives, his retrograde mentality, his rule through blackmail, and brooding over a lost love that symbolizes vanished innocence, are all literary staples. But here they are merely props for poetic vision. Rulfo does not tell a story. He captures the essence of an experience. Pedro Páramo is not epic, but elegy.

A good part of its merit rests on the use Rulfo makes of the simple rhythms of popular speech. The emotional charge they carry is such
that he can obtain maximum effects with a minimum of means. "It's a spoken language," he says. But it is not the voice of the author that speaks; it is the voices of the characters. Rulfo simply arranges, orchestrates. But, above all, he listens. The life of his books is in the language. Of course, he says, "it isn't a calculated language. I don't go out with a tape recorder to take down what people say and then try to reproduce it afterwards. There's none of that here. That's simply the way I've heard people speak since I was born. That's the way people speak in those places." For him, the rhythm of speech is that of life itself. It marks a stride. And Rulfo is right in step with it. To keep time, he will sacrifice volumes of rhetoric. He has always been against the tendency to the baroque in Latin American literature. He says: "I try to defend myself against the baroque, and I'll continue to do so, with all the means at my disposal." The strength of his work is in its restraint. From the proliferous luxuriance of a huge manuscript several hundred pages long he has been known to extract the few precious drops of sap that will go to nourish a perfect story.

In a country of literary cliques and coteries, Rulfo has always pursued a lone star. He seems to have no connection with anyone. Agustín Yáñez, a distinguished colleague who is Minister of Education today, is from his home state. Rulfo hardly seems to have heard of him. It would be hard to imagine two more different temperaments. Rulfo belongs to that race of men for whom writing is a very intimate affair that takes place in the dark of night. He is superstitious and secretive about his work, which he keeps undercover. He will talk about anything but that. A guarded silence on the subject is an old habit with him. As a young man quietly learning his craft by candlelight, he knew none of his literary contemporaries. He read a few literary reviews, he says, but otherwise kept to himself. All he knew was that "it seemed I had to become a writer." Later, between about 1948 and 1952, he admits he was associated with a group called América, publishers of a magazine of the same name. "The group is necessary to launch your career," he says a bit wryly. But this was a particularly scattered group that included the most heterogenous people. About all they had in common was the urge to get together once in a while in a Chinese café to drink coffee and hold bull sessions. The circle shrank and expanded as people came and went, until finally there was no one left. Fortunately, says Rulfo, the magazine no longer exists.

What is his relation to Mexican literature as a whole?
He seems uncertain about that. Back in his school days, there was not
much Mexican literature, he says. The authors read in Mexico in those days were Vasconcelos, the political writers of the Revolution, the chroniclers of the time: Martín Luis Guzmán, Mariano Azuela. "But even they weren't read much. Mexican literature had almost no value. For instance, the novel of the Revolution was considered simple reporting. A lot of books were published—proportionately speaking—but they weren't read. The tendency was to read foreign literature. In schools, Spanish literature. On one's own, Russian literature—imported from Spain, where it was translated and published, but not Spanish literature. U.S. literature, which was also published in Spain. We knew Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Rice and Hemingway. There was a great vogue of translations in Spain just before the Revolution, especially works of social criticism."

From the beginning, Rulfo—a traditionalist unhampered by traditionalism—struck out in his own direction. In the few literature courses he took in his free time, he was bothered by the habit teachers had of teaching the worst of Spanish literature—"Pereda, the generation of 1898. . . . I knew that was the backwardness of Latin American literature: the fact that we were absorbing a literature that was foreign to our character and disposition." Besides, Spanish culture was decadent. "They had theologized even with mathematics." Spain had isolated itself for centuries from the world. That was one of the factors that had permitted the Latin American countries to gain their independence. But culturally they were not yet emancipated. He readily recognizes his Spanish ancestry, Rulfo tells us, seized by a sudden curious scruple as we discuss the subject. He adds, amusingly, that an early ancestor of his was even a member of the royalist forces of Callejas that fought against the Mexican Revolution. Nevertheless, he reproaches Spain with provincialism and linguistic decay. "What pains me about Spain, for instance," he says, "is that it is losing its language." This is something he often discusses with people, invariably getting himself into an argument. The case is exactly the opposite in Latin America. On the one hand, Indian dialects have enriched the language. On the other, there are isolated areas where it has preserved its classic purity. He realized long ago that "Spain had no culture to give America." He was always particularly fond of Russian literature—Andreyev, Korolenko—and, above all, a great admirer of Scandinavian literature: Selma Lagerlöf, Bjornson, Knut Hamsun, Sillanpää. "Once upon a time I had the theory that literature had been born in Scandinavia, then gone down to central Europe and spread from there." He is still an assiduous
reader of Sandor Laxness, whom he considers a great renewer of European literature, from a position diametrically opposed, say, to that of French intellectualism. U.S. literature, he thinks, has also had a salutary influence in latter years. But Rulfo, with his love of the diaphanous, favors the Nordics, because of their "misty atmosphere." The same factor inclines him toward the work of the Swiss novelist, C. F. Ramuz, whose portraits of simple village souls in conflict with a hostile environment have strong connotations for him. Rulfo does not pretend his predilections are based on sound judgment. He has a curious taste for Jean Giono, whom he regards as an unappreciated talent in French letters. Giono, says Rulfo, breaks with the artifices of the Jules Romains and Mauriac tradition, which, he claims, produces works so indistinguishable that "you don’t know whom you’re reading. They all write the same.” In any case, they all sound “written.” And that is what he has always tried to avoid. “I don’t want to speak as you write, but to write as you speak.”

If he has come anywhere near achieving his purpose, he says, it is because he never really developed his style consciously. “It was something that was there already.” He detected it, and took it as he found it. In this, he may have helped point the way for some of Mexico’s younger writers, who have begun to listen more carefully to the language spoken in the streets. Not that he has imitators. He shudders at the thought. But his work may have called attention to the literary potential of popular language. “So the person who writes that way is not influenced by Pedro Páramo,” he says. “He simply stopped to listen to the language he was talking, and realized of what use it could be to him.”

Ten years have gone by since Pedro Páramo, and Rulfo, a busy man in a harsh city, has been strangely silent. He is vague about what he has published, when. He seems suddenly anguished when the subject is raised. He mentions “a story in the same line as those of El Llano en Llamas, which was supposed to be part of the book. I don’t know what happened to it. . . . It was misplaced, and then it was too late to include it in the book. . . .” According to rumors, his mildness and modesty are such that he has little control over the editorial work done on his books. The French edition of Pedro Páramo, for instance, is fatter than the original. What could have happened? Perhaps some papers got shuffled along the way. . . .

At the moment he has other ‘things in mind. As people wonder whether he will ever be heard from again, he is trying to bring himself to release an eternally forthcoming novel he has finished and torn apart
JUAN RULFO

a thousand times, called La Cordillera. "I'm sort of working at it," he says. Recently he thought he was done with it, then decided to go over it once more. It had to be thought out all over again. "I thought it was a bit too dense." He would like to talk about it, but "it's a bit difficult to explain." The setting, again, is provided by the villages of Jalisco. "But taken from their base this time. Starting with the sixteenth century." Rulfo traces the lives and fortunes of a family of "encomenderos" from its origins, through generations of wars and migrations, down to the present day. As usual in his work, the voyage is mental, a memory evoked in bits and strands by the dead's descendants. "It's really the story of a woman who's the last descendant of the family . . ." She is probably another lost soul branded by a forgotten past that she wears as a birthmark. Because the sense of history, in Rulfo, is that it may be forgotten, but not left behind. Therefore, what he has tried to do in his work is "to show a reality that I know and that I want others to know. To say: 'This is what has happened and what is happening.' And: 'Let's not fool ourselves. If it's fatal, then let's do something about it.' But I don't think I'm a fatalist at heart. . . Above all, what I want to do in La Cordillera is to show the simplicity of countrypeople, their candor. The man of the city sees their problems as country problems. But it's the problem of the whole country. It's the problem of the city itself. Because, when the countryman moves to the city, there's a change. But to a certain extent he continues to be what he was. He brings the problem with him." Proof of this is the sad-eyed Rulfo, who will undoubtedly continue to live with the problem for a long time to come.

TRANSLATIONS IN ENGLISH

"The Hill of Comrades," Harper's, Mar. 1964

Born in Valparaiso, Chile, Luis Harss was reared in Argentina. His first language was English, his second Spanish, and French his third. He attended Notre Dame and received his M.A. from Stanford. He lives in Paris, devoting his full time to writing.

I met Luis at Stanford sometime in 1954, in a labyrinthian complex of
clapboard barracks that had been a military hospital in WW II and were then used for student housing. I remember that the barracks were heated by steam: in summer they smelled of old wounds; in winter, of cold bandages and antiseptic. Luis, with his precise diction and incisive perceptions, was a single light in that otherwise acrid environment. Stocky, with a fighter’s nose, and irony in the edges of his smile, he discussed literature with the quick passion of a man who would someday make a claim upon it, not like a student required to unearth recondite myths from some pellucid text. He was very fond of Faulkner, Swift, Hemingway, Joyce, and Dostoevsky. Whenever he discussed a writer, he talked like a lover, not an analyst.

After the university days, I lost contact with Luis until I stumbled upon his first novel, The Blind (New York: Atheneum, 1963), and reviewed it. Since then, I have benefited from a continuous correspondence with him. His second novel, The Little Men, was issued by the same publisher in 1964. He is presently revising a third novel, and his book on contemporary Latin American writers, Ten in Their Times—from which the essay on Juan Rulfo is drawn—will be published by Harper & Row this September.

The Blind, centered around a summer love affair in an imaginary Latin American seaside resort, is reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s The Possessed. It is a dark and haunting book of young people wounded and damned; it is almost out of control; it is held together only by the power of its portraiture and the guileless intelligence of its author. This first novel might be considered as a fleshing-out of Octavio Paz’s line, las victimas engendran los verdugos (victims beget their executioners): the characters are their own executioners, their own victims. They hurtle toward their individual damnations in a world as luxuriant as it is deadly.

—Gus Blaisdell