

Dispatches from the Forest of Kings¹
our word is our weapon;
selected writings

by Subcommandante Insurgente Marcos

Edited by Juana Ponce de León. Forward by José Saramago

As an unperfect actor on the stage,
Who with fear is put besides his part,
Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage
Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart;
So I, for fear of trust, forget to say
The perfect ceremony of love's rite,
And in my own love's strength seem to decay,
O'ercharged with burden of mine own love's might.
O, let my books be then the eloquence
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast
Who plead for love, and look for recompense
More than that tongue that more hath more express'd.
O, learn to read what silent love hath writ;
To hear with eyes belong to love's fine wit.

-William Shakespeare, Sonnet XXIII
(quoted in *our word is our weapon*)

...when I laboriously climbed the first of the steep hills that abound in these parts [,] I was sure it would be my last....I was thinking I'd made the worst decision in my life.... If I didn't go back, it was only because I didn't know the way....

Subcommandante Marcos, of his arrival in the Lançondon forest 15 years ago,
in *our word is our weapon*.

Hmmm... Subcommandante Insurgente Marcos, a man behind a woolen ski mask who declares himself under the command of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas state, southeastern Mexico (hence the "*Subcommandante*")...

Who is this masked man?

¹ Title borrowed from Friedel and Schele's ground-breaking work, *The Forest of Kings*, in which the authors reveal the cosmology and lifeways of the ancient Maya. These folks cracked the Maya code.

I confess, when I first read about Marcos ten years ago, I cut out his picture from the NYTimes--what a gorgeous man, even under that blotch of black wool--and tacked it up on my bulletin board--sigh!

I did not pick up *our word is our weapon* to be rafted back on a sentimental journey to former decades of protest or to humor a friend, though I have known at least one person who went down to be with the Zapatistas as a Witness for Peace. I don't trust the news; I don't trust very many gringo reporters; I believe if you want to find out what is going on in this world you do as the bumper sticker says--shoot your television set--and start reading. Who is this man? And, a nagging question, who wrote this book? Just Subcommandante M? The English is so consistent and poetic, the list of translators so various, the echoes of Spanish language syntax--long, Spanish sentences, passive voice and reflexive verbs--so absent-- Well, Dear Reader/Mi Lector, if Marcos is Marcos, the same swashbuckling rebel who sends out burlesque broadsides and evocative emails worldwide from Chiapas' Lançandon rainforest, he thumbs his schnoz at your NAFTA and its Chihuahua, the Mexican government:

In one corner there is the Market, the new sacred beast--money and its conception of time denying both yesterday and tomorrow. In the other corner is History--the one that Power always forgets. The reaches of memory root and temper humanity in the past, present, and future. In the cult of 'modernity', the present serves as both weapon and shield. NOW is the name of the new altar upon which principles, loyalties, convictions, shame, memory and truth are sacrificed. The past, a guide to be learned from and upon which to grow, doesn't exist for the technocrats, under whose rule our nation suffers. The future can be nothing more than a lengthening of the present for these professional amnesiacs...[They believe] the past should be devalued, ignored, eliminated." (147)

This "phobia of history," Marcos remonstrates, is perfectly exemplified in Mexico's attitude towards its indigenous peoples. Reputedly there are oil deposits ringing the rainforest and uranium in them thar indigenous hills--now which, Estimados Lectores, do you think is more important to Presidente Fox and his cronies? The Mayans, or those deposits?

Looking back at the forbidden fruit of history, back to 1517 when the first Spaniard appeared on the shores of the Yucatan only to be sent packing by the Mayans who greeted them--looking back to 1519 when the Spaniards trotted ashore once more, invaded and defeated the Mexican Empire, was it not ever thus? Looking forward, how long will this little band, whose members call themselves Zapatistas after the famous Mexican Revolutionary, and their Marcos survive? What will happen if they don't?

When I first encountered Marcos' book last year, I had written to a friend,

"I am reading ... in a crowded cafe where I know they will soon be agitating to have me leave so I can "free" my table for another customer--social amenities sacrificed to the gods of commerce--being here, I look South. There it is--there they are?--the ghost towers. It would be so easy to say, well it was just full of well-heeled fat cats--but that's patently untrue. Plenty wage slaves lost, people from all over the globe (200 different countries, the reports say), and of all races, ethnicities, creeds, at getting and, if not so easily spending, all caught in the Market's edifice, all who did not escape caught in its destruction.

Ashes, ashes, we *all* fall down." (10/8/01)

The first intrusion through what the U.S. thought of as an impenetrable wall protecting it from all harm and a book purportedly authored a Mexican intellectual subordinating himself to the will of indigenous peoples in the Lançandon rainforest--these two phenomenon merge in my mind.

Traditionally, the Mayan people, from whom many of Marcos' constituency descend, held a view of the world like many indigenous Americans: the world had been created and recreated several times. Each time, that universe was destroyed because it was not perfect. Each time some seeds of the recently extinguished past remained and became sown into the next, requiring resolution in the following universe. Running through the center of the present universe is the World Tree, rooted in the "otherworld," where forefathers and foremothers reside, and where other worlds perhaps coexist. This tree reaches up into the present "Middleworld" on into the living sky: indeed, one can see this tree raise up from north to south in the night sky. It is, in fact, the Milky Way, past, present, future, all connected. Popularly we see this tree innocently appear in Mexican "folk" arts--the tree of life, world tree...

(Ashes, ashes, we all fall down..)

Columbus, El Colón, the fat North, the skinny South, the Old World of the New World, entered by the New World of the Old World, market time, now, no-time... "El Sup," as Marcos nicknames himself, lives in the same conditions as the indigenous poor, but sends the contents of this book out by *baud rate*--- what conflation of time, what confusions of chronology have been given us? In the sixties, French teacher and scholar, Régis Debray, tried to put a new spin on the hard line of the left; but he had no sense of humor: his readers lost their way

in the jungle of his intellect. Debray's hero, Che Guevara, was killed in the mountains of Bolivia on October 9, 1967, and a plea went out to save Debray who was captured with Guevara; but no one seemed to pick up the thread. Now, Marcos--Subcommandante solo or by committee, *it really does not matter*--is the only political writer who speaks of resistance AND of the very coopting of time, of the "natural" (that is, inherent) time by which the Americas once moved, of time as memory.

Oh--and this may be the clearest indication that our author is, indeed, El Sup--mocking his nose, his enemies, Marcos DOES have a sense of humor.

Considering the way the first foreigners arrived on American shores, one has to: Against the common sense of his day, Cristóbal Colón believed you could come East by going West. He dropped a log with a cord tied to it to the lee of his bow, flipped over his hourglass, and measured the unraveling line against the length of his ship to calculate speed. He then lied to his crew, telling them they had covered less distance than they actually had; else, he felt, they would despair, and mutiny would not be far behind. He railed against the Pole Star, lower on the horizon in the Caribbean than Europe and, one by one, rejected the counsel of astrolabe, quadrant, and charts.² Further, Columbus lacked any sense of synchronicity, any sense that his world could, and in fact did, coexist with others, that unfamiliar journeys and memories unfurled elsewhere, in unfamiliar space and time.

Land Ho! he cried instead, We have found Cathay!

By 1496, one third of the indigenous population of Hispaniola was gone. To his batty dying day, "El Colón" clung to the belief that he had found China—an old world where he could reset the clock for a fresh start; but others christened this unfamiliar vastness the "New World." All the while, from 1500 to 1600 alone, the indigenous population of the Americas plummeted in the worst genocide the world has ever known-- from 50 to 8 million. Having no prior existence in Christian³ minds, this "New World" had no history, no time. Any witnesses to the contrary were fast being obliterated. That "no one" knew about it beforehand predicated that "no one" was even there.

² It gets worse: On his fourth voyage, despite his compass, he claimed that the same north star "wandered" and that the southern hemisphere bulged into a shape like a woman's nipple whereon was located Paradise. For an interesting lay-discussion of this, see Kolbert's "The Lost Mariner", in the October 14 & 21, 2002, issue of *The New Yorker*.

³ And the texts are full of Europeans very intentionally and self consciously using the designation "Christians" to refer to themselves.

If the first blush of time and a trembling 'emptiness' awaited European travelers come to this 'discovered' place, any old "new world" could be put there. Europe's emissaries set out to do this with great abandon; and this is how "Someone" had a field day in North America, the Caribbean, California, Mexico, New Mexico, South America. Isabel of Spain gave Columbus Centroamerica for his troubles; Cortez drained the lakes of Mexico City, took la Malinche⁴ as his mistress and Mexico as his latifundio⁵; William Walker declared himself Ruler of Nicaragua; Pineapple Barons ran the Banana Republics; *Estadounidenses*⁶ invaded Puerto Rico, La Republica Dominicana, Haiti, and sent in the Marines. Dwindling, dwindling, dwindling, the native peoples of the hemisphere have sunk to the very bottom of a socioeconomic ladder whose next rung might as well be heaven.

In "Unveiling Mexico," roughly half of Marcos' *our word is our weapon*, the author apprises readers of these facts over and over. Some of what he says is not music to our royal, rhetoric-weary ears. He has ideology; where, generally speaking, what's left of the left's up North is a shambles. He repeats himself. He quotes Shakespeare; he includes letters to Eduardo Galeano, Mumia al Jamal, to his and their enemies... Sometimes his optimism is irresistible. Sometimes his analysis sounds naive and sixties'-ish. Sometimes he wears us out.

The great Neighbor from the North leans its bulk against the wall of its pen and ruffles a snore--it suffers from political Alzheimer's "Power kills not only life," tsks-tsks Subcommandante, " but memory." (268) Think of Ronald Reagan. Do not succumb to walrus-ness: I insist that you continue reading, right through Chiapas 101. Only then can you enter into the Forest of Kings⁷, in this case Lançandon. You will not go there alone, for the shadow of death goes with you.

Here I go, breaking myself to pieces, and patching body and spirit. Today I broke a piece off my shoulder. It broke just like that and sounded like a dry branch under a boot. Hardly a "crack," just a dull light thud on the floor. I picked it up, and I replaced it to the best of my knowledge of guerrilla anatomy. I tied it up with a reed and continued walking. Yesterday it was a piece off my right thigh that broke and fell. I'm not losing hope that a good piece of this impertinent nose will fall off

⁴ Cortez' indigenous mistress, much reviled to this day.

⁵ ranch

⁶ United States-ian, as in MexicAN, CubAN, Latin AmericAN, etc.

⁷ as Schele and Friedel, the northamericans who "cracked" the code of ancient Mayan writing on the *tee-tun* call the world of the Maya. Remember, too, that the Mayan world once extended much farther into southeastern Mexico than the Yucatan.

and leave me with a profile perhaps less aerodynamic but more manageable, not because I want to contradict the attorney general and the story of the man from Tampico⁸, but because it wouldn't deform the ski masks so much. (236 - 237)

Comrades have died. Resistance is serious business: what? joking at a time like this? An army patrol misses them by 15 meters--"death, dressed in olive green"-- El Sup makes light of it?

Hold on, he tells us, as he climbs a spiral of smoke rising from his pipe, to the highest branch of the *ceiba* tree "...a sorrow is gaining on the moon, now darkening a good bit of her figure.." First Mother, Maya goddess of the moon...

Or is it one of the ancestral Palenque⁹ gods, the one from whom smoke rises as he perches in a tree, the one linked with the sacred ritual of bloodletting? Marcos claims the tallest tree in the rainforest, the sacred cotton ceiba. Oh yes, Wacah Chan, the World Tree.¹⁰ As any traditional Maya knows, "perching on the ceiba" replicates the act of Itzam-Yeh or First Father's establishing his natural place in the sky, entering a shrine there.¹¹ The Tree rises from the eveningstar [Venus], it bleeds red sap, it splits into the Vision Serpent. Visions take the warrior on a descent into the West to battle the Lords of the Dead for life; if victorious, he reemerges in the East.

And the moon, initiatrix of Marcos' vision?

The Moon is a satellite of Earth. That is, the Moon spends her life turning around Earth, with the same tedium with which a merry-go-round turns, empty, in a town fair. Faced with this punishment, the Moon says nothing. What can she say when there is a long and invisible chain that ties her to Earth and keeps her from leaving to take a turn around so many other stars and planets. Nevertheless, as far as one can see, the Moon is not vengeful. It doesn't occur to her, for example, to let herself fall onto Earth with the same wavering spin of a coin, falling to shed light on that initial mystery: heads or tails?

He goes on,

No, the Moon doesn't let herself fall. This can only mean that the Moon has hope."
(249)

⁸ The search to determine Marcos' identity goes on. Here he refers to speculation that he is Rafael Guillén from Tampico

⁹ A sacred center, now in ruins, part of the Mayan empire and south of the Yucatan into Guatemala.

¹⁰ Traditionally, the Maya continue to feed the World Tree and its sprouts so that people will "continue to prosper." (*Maya Cosmos*, Friedel, Schele, and Parker 256) According to these experts, however,

¹¹ (*ibid* n417)

Marcos keeps going on, claiming that he has freed himself from a certain Knight of the White Moon--huh? !!@#!!? has our Subcommandante's cheese just slid off his cracker? Hold on--the Knight of the White Moon was a character out of Don Quixote who kept trying to persuade DQ to come home, to be safe, stay at home and out of danger. Ultimately, safety cost the Don his life.¹² The wages of sitting in one's armchair are high, amigos, I suppose he is saying, try a ceiba tree instead.

Rising up on the smoke of his own pipe, Marcos stirs up old memories, indeed, bringing his readers into the world of his *compañeros*-- "To teach is the same as to struggle..." He binds up *our word* with not only his intimate tales from the forest, but with the stories of Don Antonio, *his* teacher, whose memories, whose past, whose many years are as much a part of that land as they are part of himself. This book--these words--are perhaps the most bizarre resistance yet: the rhetoric of the left takes a peculiar turn. Or is it so strange?

What Marcos does/is doing is political magical realism—and I am not thinking of generic brand magical realism, with its formulaic cast of amiable ghosts and buttinski ancestors worrying earthly protagonists' adventures. Oh, no. I maintain, with Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite, that magical realism is the artist's attempt to respond to deep social, political and spiritual trauma—the reaction to plantation slavery that so marks Caribbean literature, for example; the reaction to the genocides of the new world in the work of Wilson Harris; the reaction to the slave revolution in Haiti as per Alejo Carpentier; the reaction to the repeated attempts--from the North--at the banana republic-ization of Latin America as in Garcia Marquez' *Cien Años de Solidad*. One hundred years--I could go on. But what Marcos does, in fact, is take the indigenous culture of the Maya seriously in a way that hard-line revolutionaries rarely do. For, as I understand some Marx' emphasis upon internationalism, there is a *disregard* of ethnic cultures amongst the old hardliners in the interest of a global political culture and a rather rusty international trade. Portrayed by very literate pen, indeed, what is at risk here--

¹² The Knight of the White Moon was also the Knight of the Wood or Knight of the Mirrors. So called because his coat was overspread with numerous small mirrors. It was Sampson Carrasco, a bachelor of letters, who adopted the disguise of a knight under the hope of overthrowing Don Quixote, when he would have imposed upon him the penalty of returning to his home for two years; but it so happened that Don Quixote was the victor, and Carrasco's scheme was abortive. As Knight of the White Moon Carrasco again challenged the Man'chegan lunatic, and overthrew him; whereupon the vanquished knight was obliged to return home, and quit the profession of knight-errantry for twelve months. Before the term expired he died. (Cervantes: Don Quixote, pt. ii. bk. i. 11, etc.; bk. iv. 12.) Barrow's Dictionary.

and what has been in peril for 500 years--is the land, the bodies of these First Americans, and their *consciencia*, their consciousness.

Marcos is not naive, however. He is not asking his decadent government--bought and sold and paid for several times over--for a promised land. The needs of the people of the Lançandon forest are very real: access to medical care, decent housing, education, adequate nutrition--conditions that even so improved, we in the North would consider too Spartan to bear. In particular Marcos looks beyond political catechisms for answers, past the dust of theory, past the bloodless jargon that keeps academic "radicals" in that armchair, all the while reassuring themselves that it is okay to squat there.

I am sighing with nostalgia, remembering the good old times when the bad guys were the bad guys and the good guys were the good guys. When Newton's apple followed its trajectory from the tree toward some childish hand. When the world smelled like a schoolroom on the first day of class: of fear, of mystery, of newness. (217)

Like Don Quixote, the knight-errant of La Mancha, Marcos interrogates the cold efficiency of the emergent modern state. The notion that a rag-taggle group of *indigenes* in the mountains of the Mexican southeast would hazard this is a bit quixotic, if not David and Goliath-esque, and "El Sup" knows that. Commenting on the federalistas'¹³ 1994 razing of Guadalupe Tepeyac, the site of the first international meeting of Zapatistas and their supporters, he says

...For each resident, child or adult, they brought in ten soldiers; for each horse, a war tank; for each chicken, an armored vehicle. In total 5,000 soldiers patrol a deserted village and "protect" a slew of dogs and animals belonging to no one. Let them do that in all the autonomous communities, everywhere, in all of the ranches. Let them fill the whole state of Chiapas with soldiers... (227)

Magical realism...

The world's leaders flash their forked tongues. CONSUME! CONSUME! CONSUME! Be realistic, now--someone is always going to go hungry, someone will always suffer. A nightly surfing of the mainstream convinces the increasingly worried well, by some hat trick, "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world." Voracious internationalists devour world resources with neither a backward nor a forward glance--"No One lives in that forest. Cut it down." Aligned with a small group of people whose humble ancestors once walked in

¹³ Mexican federal troops known for their brutality and corruption.

that Forest of Kings,¹⁴ who have always been part of that land and that place--with a literate and able word as his weapon, Marcos fills the second half of their book with narrative. Concluding the Mayan tale, "The Origin Of Light," which tells of the emergence of women and men of the corn--the Maya--into that forest, he says

...With heart and head we must be bridges, so that the men and women of all the worlds may walk from night to day. (369)

What will happen if they don't survive? Says Marcos: we lose our soul.

¹⁴ I make this distinction because of the class system in the ancient Mayan civilization itself. There the powerful bled themselves, offering their blood to the Lords of Death, on behalf of their kingdom, even sacrificing war captives on important ritual occasions. Fascinating as their world seems, there is little mention of the common people of that time, yet these are who have kept the essential, less bloody precepts of indigenous belief alive.