



Oaxaca Times

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Free

Morning in México

"We talk so grandly, in capital letters, about Morning in Mexico. All it amounts to is one little individual looking at a bit of sky and trees, then looking down at the page of his exercise book."

DH Lawrence: "Mornings in Mexico"

And here I find myself, a part of Morning in Mexico, looking down at my exercise book, on the terrace of a house in Oaxaca, a city which Lawrence and so many other writers, some good, some bad, found and still find so conducive to the solitary art of scribbling. And whatever I happen to write, it still amounts to the same thing, even though Oaxaca is now a little bigger than when Lawrence lived here and even though I am probably a little taller than he was.

My "bit of sky" is expansive; I have more light than anyone could possibly need and I also have "some trees," one of which rises up some sixty meters into the sky beyond the walls of this house, giving shade to the seminary next door and towering, at night, a cloud of green which, when struck with moonlight, appears as a mute witness to the passing of the centuries, to the complex, enigmatic and violent history of what is now Oaxaca de Juárez. I like this tree. It has endured the rigors of time, the earthquakes, the sieges, the occasional bolt of lightning. It puts everything into perspective, not least myself, an alien being wrestling with a common problem: how to describe this place?

Lawrence did a fair job, although I would have to talk grandly of Morning in México, a morning which seems as if it could last forever but which will,



Oaxaca City

eventually, become a shadowless thing, a little too hot for ambling about, but just about perfect for my first sip of Mezcal. I have my friend, Rodrigo Diaz Cervantes, with whom I can discuss the finer points, the never ending details, of that terrifying, transparent liquor: yes, a thimbleful would most certainly put Morning in Mexico on a grand scale, but I will postpone such a diversion until at least half way through this little exercise. One mustn't rush into things. After all, I have at least to

try and make sense. I nevertheless pick up the fresh bottle of "El Cortijo" and invert it, to check whether there is a ring of bubbles, un collar de perlas, lining the upturned meniscus. Then I put the bottle to one side, safely beyond reach for the time being, on the far side of the table.

Lawrence, of course, was not the only author to pass the time of day in Oaxaca, wondering what it was that

■ Continued on Page

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Morning in México

Continued From Page 1

made the place tick and what made him tick so well within it. This strange, bearded figure, was always the unknown quantity, revelling in the hidden splendors of his surroundings, the more exotic, as far as he was concerned, the better to pursue his art. There is a charming lady who runs a shop down the road, whose father, it seems, was his doctor. Yes, even mythological characters need a good doctor in Oaxaca, one who will obligingly remind them that "Para todo mal, Mezcal y contra todo bien, tambien!" The editor of this newspaper also tells me that the most effective antidote for "amoebas" is a swig of Mezcal to intoxicate them and then a spoonful of sand to blast them to Kingdom Come. One almost sympathizes with them; but not for long.

What of all the others, that inventory of dusty scribblers, who appear from the four corners of the globe, pouring off buses, trains and taxis, note-books in hand, waiting impatiently to fill those virgin pages with their own views of this place, remarking, perhaps, upon the greenness of the stone in this Emerald City, the preponderance of ornately decorated churches, the ridge of mountains which so neatly encircles the metropolis or the mysterious light of early evening, when the Zócalo comes to life, transforming itself, to the accompaniment of a waltz carried in the air from the imposing bandstand, into a large, open theatre in which every passerby becomes not only a spectator but also an actor of sorts, repeating a role so often

played in the past and always to a packed house, so that even the casual tourist finds himself being applauded by a veteran of Morning in Mexico! He looks around, carefully, and catches his reflection in the face of a complete stranger seated at an adjacent table, who is doing precisely the same thing. Where are you from? Says the first. Where are you going? Says the other.

All these people, individually, in gangs or in gaggles, happily pursue their fantasies and are somewhat perturbed to find that their fantasies then pursue them, as they walk the streets, linger and loiter, before returning to their hotels or their houses and endeavoring to compare fact with fiction, the former constantly intruding upon their imaginative processes as they lay down their weary heads and take a rest from the life of a foreign city. And the writers? What do they do? What possible order can they attach to the things they see and feel, so that it all makes sense, somehow?

I prefer Aldous Huxley to Lawrence, which is probably letting the side down, although I am still being remarkably patriotic for someone who has spent a number of years travelling far and wide looking for Oaxaca and, in the process, lost his bearings a little.

Huxley, forever the intellectual, the lofty, myopic genius, sought in this valley high above the sea, a transcendental experience, a way of seeing inwardly; his experiments with halluci-

Continued on Page 4

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Continued from Page 3

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nogens must have brought him closer to many things, not least some form of understanding of the people who made this place, from nothing, long before planes scratched lines in the sky or the strange beings (actually soldiers on horseback) descended from the north. But that's another story.

Huxley's reactions to Oaxaca, well documented in his "Beyond the Mexique Bay," find resonance sixty years later. "Yes, Oaxaca is a fine place," he declares, "A stately city!" And Santo Domingo is "one of the most extravagantly gorgeous churches in the world." He was naturally astounded by Monte Alban, describing the site as "incomparably magnificent... Imagine a great isolated valley at the junction of three broad valleys; an island rising nearly three thousand feet from the green sea of fertility beneath it. An astonishing situation. But the Zapotec architects were not embarrassed by the artistic responsibilities it imposed on them, They levelled the hill-top ... few architects have had such a sense of austere dramatic grandeur as these temple builders of the great Toltec tradition. And few have been given so free a hand."

He also had some interesting things to say about Lawrence, noting, a little haughtily, that "the attempt to return to primitiveness is both impractical and... wrong." One cannot be sure that was, indeed, Lawrence's intention. Strangely, there is no mention of Mezcal in Huxley's reflections, although he devotes a great deal of time



Simon Lane

to the discussion of "handicrafts," with which he is not particularly impressed, although he admires the stonework at Mitla, likening it to "petrified weaving."

One must take it all, of course, as one takes Mezcal, with a pinch of salt. After all, Frank Waters, in "Mexico Mystique," reckons Monte Alban to be only fifteen hundred feet above the valley. I suppose it depends on how you get there. And how tall you are.

For my part, I have never been one for pots and rugs: I am entirely lacking in condescension, I have no pretensions to a return to the primitive, or, for that matter, to a house full of bric-à-brac. A reluctant product of an age which someday someone else might find interesting, I acknowledge

Continued on Page 5



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■ Continued from Page 4

the fact that I can never integrate myself, that I am forever an interloper and that I have not the required aesthetic faculties to judge what is called "indigenous art." But I can still have a drink with a stranger and laugh in any language, I am still obsessed with the idea that, in microcosmic terms, we are all human, all equal, a delightful reduction to absurdity of "homo sapiens," capable of creating and destroying beauty in the time it takes to swig a mouthful of "Dos Equis." What we actually do becomes strangely insignificant when we are taken out of our context, held up to the light and briefly examined before being set down, once again, onto the corner of a pavement. It could be confusing. And it is. But I digress: "El Cortijo," just slipped a few inches towards me.

I enjoyed immensely the opening story to one of Italo Calvino's last books, "The Jaguar of The Sun," in which he alludes to the sensual pleasures of Mexican food, seated at a table in the ex-convent, now luxurious hotel, Camino Real. Perhaps I am too epicurean by nature: I find it easier to

digest the beauty of a strange culture with a knife and fork or a brass cup, rather than through the darkened lenses of my sunglasses. One takes what one can on a visit to Oaxaca and one has to sit on one's suitcase in order to close it upon leaving. Mine will contain many things a myriad images, a myriad bottles, half-empty, half-full; my intoxication will linger and I will see everything so clearly the minute the plane lifts off the ground. Oaxaca will become smaller and smaller and I will be able to hold it in my hand, like a post-card, its reversed image that of the grandiose, extravagant mountain shaped to fit an architectural fantasy. Then I can say that I wish that I were there, amidst the great Mexican landscape, instead of here, walking the aisles of a distant airport, trying to find my luggage and a spot to smoke a cigarette without being arrested.

Huxley's fiction ("Eyeless in Gaza") like that of Graham Greene ("The Power and The Glory") benefited, unquantifiably, from that landscape, one which was never simply a

■ Continued on Page 6

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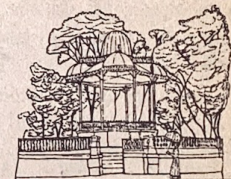
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Continued from Page 5



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backdrop but which seemed to seep into the very blood of their protagonists, that mixec bag of characters who found themselves so subordinated by the air they breathed and by the breathtaking richness of this exotic land. Their creators should have been grateful for the inspiration and they doubtless were, for this is a writer's paradise, twenty-four hours a day, or, at least, not just in the morning. "I do profoundly think," wrote Malcom Lowry (in a different kettle of fish altogether) in a letter to his friend, Juan Fernando Marquez in 1937, "That the Oaxaquenians are among the most courteous, sweetly gracious and fundamentally decent people in the entire world" Known for his excess, his hyperbole? His waywardness and an almost pathological desire to court disaster, Lowry could have been exaggerating, carried on a wave of emotion, or of Mezcal, for he was partial to a drop himself. Not a bit of it! The ragged mascal was thrown into the local slammer more than once, so one might

say that this was praise indeed, as opposed to the platitude of a well-mannered guest, however welcome, or unwelcome, he may have been. Of all the English writers of this century, he was the one to dig the deepest into Mexico; and he very nearly dug his grave. Which is not to say he didn't like it, either: he found his exegesis here, his paradiso and his inferno. The purgatorio happened, oddly enough, in a cottage in Ripe, Sussex, many years later. Dante is everywhere you like to find him.

I am as overawed by this city as he was: I can feel its beauty, I can sense its beguiling, elusive quality, but I cannot really get the measure of it or find the means of defining it? which is probably why it so impresses me.

We, the outsiders from a spoiled world up north, are rather self-conscious, we like our teas crossed and our eyes dotted. Sometimes, it is a plea-

Continued on Page 7

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■ Continued from Page 6

sure in itself not to understand, not to know, to allow an atmosphere which is almost palpable and certainly unique to remain unidentifiable. Why? When? How old? How much? Are the questions which fill the air, ininterrogatory bubbles, above this great valley. And what a delight it is to be told that "we still don't know," in answer to another, anxious questions related to the orientation of an ancient structure or to the manners and customs of a people who could be friends one day but who would never knowingly give away too many secrets!

I can neither add nor subtract from it all, from all the things that have been said or written about this place. A modest scribbler, another one, from England, I arrived as a result of a premonition, or a dream. I am staying in a four hundred year old house with its own Garden of Eden, a patch of rich, tropical green, full of hosts and birds, either mating or fighting or trying to do both at the same time, singing and shrieking and screeching in rehearsal for some unsolicited musical programme or peep-show. Some of them have nested in my study, they occasionally interrupt my work, but they never really bother me: they have things to do, perhaps they think I am interrupting them? We get along quite well, actually, doubtless because we are all strangers in the same place.

I spend days in this hermetically sealed paradise, repeating Lowry's refrain to be found, on the last page of his novel, "Under the Volcano."

"Do you like this garden, that is yours? We evict those who destroy!"

I like this garden which, for the moment, is mine; the sky above it is constantly blue; the birds awaken me so that I no longer have to buy batteries for the alarm clock I long since banished to a corner cupboard; the stars appear, on cue, every evening; and the moon changes its shape, from a sliver to a neat circle and back again, so that I might enjoy a different view of it, wondering why it was that man decided to go for a walk on it, when it looks so appealing from afar. For all this I am grateful.

And, as for Morning in México, it has now slipped past me. There will be no other, which I know, in advance, will be identical to today's, for me to savour tomorrow. The time slips past, but if I wish, I can sop it, by reminding myself that I am in México, in Oaxaca. I can restart my own, twenty-four hour cycle of existence, inaugurating it, in celebratory fashion, with that drop of Mezcal I promised myself a while ago, to keep the "amoebas" at bay, strictly, you understand, for medicinal purposes.

Be warned, however: the "pearl necklace" is not a definite guide to quality. Appearances, after all, can be deceptive, which is something for which we should all be eternally thankful.

- Written by Simon Lane exclusively for the Oaxaca Times ®

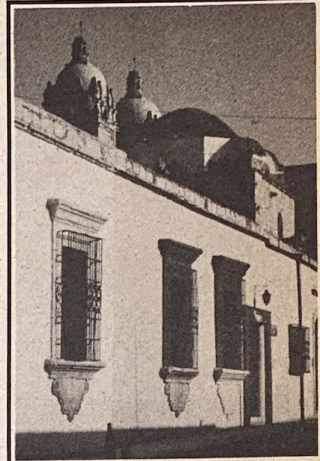


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