From Voice and Ear to Hand and Eye

Dennis Tedlock


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From Voice and Ear to Hand and Eye

Standard practices in the textualization, translation, and interpretation of the spoken arts are called into question by our use of tape and film. Further questions arise when we realize that the peoples whose verbal arts we study have their own distinct notions and habits with respect to the reproduction and explication of discourse. The case in point here is that of Mayan discourse, Quiché in particular, explored by way of a narrative account of the telling of a story and the offering of a prayer.

The capstan turns, the tape slides across the head, and we hear someone making a speech or telling a story all over again. Or rather, we hear an electronic representation of a speech or story. There have been some changes along the way: the recording was made somewhere else and some time ago, and the person who spoke into the microphone isn’t here with us as we play it back. But the signals from the tape, considered all by themselves, are still distributed in time, "real" time, in the same way they were then. As for the place, it gives itself away by noises, resonances, and (even when nothing else is happening) its ambient sound. And we can easily recognize the voice of the individual speaker, even if we forgot to label the tape.

It would be easy to construct a similar description of what happens when images recorded on film or tape are reviewed. Temporal relationships among movements are replicated, and places and persons can be identified. But whether the representation is auditory or visual, it is both incomplete and distorted. In both cases, there is a flattening of spatial relationships. With sound we have come to expect partial compensation by means of stereophonic recording, but stereoscopic images were more commonly seen in past generations than they are now.

If the image of a person making a speech or telling a story appears on our screen, we may see that person look at a particular member of the audience, or use a gesture, or even convert some handy object into a prop, but we will have little idea of what these movements are about unless we know what the performer is saying. In part, the audible aspect of the language of the speech or story does the same job as the visible aspect, situating the speaker with respect to first, second, and third persons, and locating persons or objects here.

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or there, in front or behind, above or below, east or west. But even at this
diegetic level both the audible and visible signs begin to take us off screen, re-
ferring to persons, places, and times other than the ones that belong to the
present of the tape or film. Indeed, there may even be references to persons,
places, and times that exist nowhere except in the mind’s ear and eye.

Language provides the speaker with the means of constructing whole
worlds, filled with things that can be heard, seen, felt, tasted, or smelled.
When a speech is made or a story is told, reality is not in the sound or light
waves that reach a recording device, but in the imaginations of the speaker and
listeners. And the words and other signs that evoke that reality have already
been through one round of editing: the speaker has said some things that could
have been left out, left out other things that could have been said, and may
even have spliced in footage, so to speak, that came from some other speech
or story.

How, then, are we to prepare such a thing for publication—or rather, re-
publish it? If our audience is to consist solely of sociolinguists or perfor-
mancc-oriented folklorists, the reality of the event will be centered elsewhere
than it was for the original speaker and listeners. This new audience will want
a record of the way particular sign systems were used by a particular performer
in front of a particular audience on a particular occasion, but they won’t be
terribly interested in exploring the worlds projected by signs. If anyone is
going to feel obligated to sit through representations of long speeches and sto-
ries that take the form of talking (and listening) heads, and to do so repeatedly,
they will. And if they are real purists, they will even want mistakes and inter-
ruptions left in.

On the other hand, if our audience is to consist of people who do want to
explore alternative worlds, they may prefer not to have their visual fields
preempted by actual images that can only be described as boring when com-
pared with the virtual images produced by language. They may wish to stare
off into space or even close their eyes part of the time, just as some of the orig-
inal listeners may have done. A mistake or interruption will only be a distrac-
tion for them, unless the performer was quick-witted enough to make it seem
to fit right in. Or unless the listener is a psychoanalyst who has been waiting
for a mistake to happen.

Now let’s go a step further and imagine that there are differences of age,
sex, class, education, occupation, dialect, and/or subculture between the per-
former and his or her customary audience, on the one hand, and the field-
worker and his or her prospective audience, on the other hand. Historians,
literary scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists seem will-
ing to let these differences loom quite large before they begin to exercise caution
when claiming to know what others may be talking or thinking about,
and even what others may be thinking about without realizing they are thinking
about it. But ethnographers, folklorists, and linguists, or at least some of
them, may find it necessary to ask performers and listeners to talk about talk,
to interpret for them, to help them understand what was going on. In this way
they begin the construction of a discourse that stands apart from (and comes
later than) the original performance, a hermeneutical discourse, before they
leave the field.

At this stage the discourse of interpretation remains close to the discourse of
the text, and not only because the fieldworker is still talking to the original
performer and listeners. The elapsed time of the performance itself was already
taken up, in part, with hermeneutics, with statements that elucidated or elab-
orated what was just said instead of advancing the action or shifting to the next
topic. As far as that goes, there is no way language use can proceed at all with-
out producing signs that stand in the relationship of interpretand and interpo-
tant to one another. Even when discourse is constructed by surrealistic leaps of
the imagination or by chance operations, listeners or readers perceive at least
some connections as quickly as ever—though they may be provoked, more
often than usual, into wandering off on an internal hermeneutical discourse of
their own. The fieldworker may record a performance that seems, at first, to
present difficulties much like those of an avant-garde work, but will assume
that the speaker intended to produce an interpretable discourse and will want
to know what the acceptable interpretations might be.\(^1\)

Obviously the fieldworker has an even greater need for hermeneutical turns
of discourse, whether inside or outside the original performance, than does the
original audience, and the fieldworker’s own audience will have a still greater
need. In publication, whatever form it may take, the usual approach to this
problem is to treat the recorded performance on the model of Scripture, an
inviolable text that has come to us from out of the “past” and now cries out
for a “present” discourse of a qualitatively different sort, an interpretation.\(^2\)
If the representation of this text takes written form, isolated words or brief
phrases of interpretation or emendation may be allowed inside it, but they will
be sealed off with brackets. Fuller interpretation is customarily kept outside
the text, whether it is positioned before it, after it, at the foot of it, or between
separate covers.

The tenor and texture of the voice of interpretation proper, our voice, will
be discontinuous with the voices of the text, though we may quote a few frag-
ments of the text. When it comes to interpretive statements made by the per-
former or listeners outside the text proper, we are apt to report them in indirect
discourse or summarize them in the third-person plural, rather than quoting
them directly. When the interval between text and interpretation is wide not
only in voicing but in terms of turn-taking, our readers may forget some of
what we said by the time they get to the relevant passages of the text, or they
may forget some of the text by the time they get to what we said. If they turn
back and forth or look at the footnotes too often while trying to find their way
from one end of the text to the other, they may miss the point of the orator’s
argument or lose the thread of the storyteller’s plot.

The graphic separation of text and interpretation diverts our attention from
the fact that multitudes of small editorial decisions, each of them an act of
interpretation, go into the making of the text itself. Many of these acts are not so much decisions as they are unexamined expressions of the hegemony of written forms of discourse, specifically discourse printed in the Roman alphabet, and still more specifically, discourse cast as either prose or verse. Punctuation is determined by reading the already-transcribed words for syntactical units rather than by returning to the tape for a fresh hearing that focuses on intonational contours. If the text is segmented into lines and stanzas, these may be determined by scanning the already-transcribed words for quantifiable patterns of parallelism, rhyme, or meter, rather than by listening to contours and silences. Foregroundering and backgrounding by means of amplitude, which can operate at two or three different scales, are likely to be ignored altogether—after all, we have all been taught to avoid any but sparing use of exclamation points, italics, and parentheses in our own writing. And if the performer speaks with many different voice qualities, these are fated to be reduced to two broad categories by the opening and closing of quotation marks.

Such is the established mode of production for "oral literature," which is really quite aptly named. Oral literature deserves its reputation for being short on characterization and long on repetition, but these features are in large measure artifacts of the process by which performances get reduced to sheer words, shorn of the pauses, changes of amplitude and pitch, and tones of voice that differentiate the quoted characters (or the moods of a particular character) from one another and make the same words mean different things. Models for transcriptions that might go beyond the simple choice between prose that runs and verse that marches have been available for a long time now, in the scripts of plays and in the poetry of Russian futurists and American projectivists, but we who use the rhetoric of performance when talking about our field recordings have only barely begun to put our transcriptions where our mouths are.

The sheer process of notation can open our ears to things we never heard before and lead us to revise our picture of the world projected by an oral performance, but once again there arises the question of how much our readers can keep track of all at once. As our notation system becomes increasingly elaborate there will come a point at which they will have to start flipping back and forth between the script itself and the key to the conventions we used in writing it. Or else they may work themselves into a position rather like that of speakers who learn by rote, producing the correct sounds without knowing what they're talking about.

When we expand our notation system we also expand the number and variety of small interpretive decisions that get hidden away on the text side of the boundary between text and interpretation, but so far we have done very little questioning of the boundary itself. Our continuing tendency to do relatively little notation of such phenomena as tones of voice and gestures can be seen, in part, as a consequence of boundary maintenance. Other phenomena can be accommodated by graphic devices: pauses can be indicated by line breaks, amplitude by type size or boldness, ordinary intonations by punctua-
tion, and unusual intonations by rises and falls in the line of type. But tones of voice, which come in many different shades and textures and can even be unique to a particular moment, require descriptions in words, the problem being that the intrusion of too many of our own words among those we wish our readers to attribute to the performer would threaten the illusion of the integrity of the text.

For all that the publication of oral performances by means of sound recordings might seem to offer us an escape from the problems that come with trying to get everything on paper, there are important ways in which we go on acting as if nothing had changed. During the recording of the performance itself we tend to keep our mouths shut, even when local custom demands a responsive audience. If, on the original tape, our voice intrudes just before or after the performance, our cuts for publication will probably remove it. In effect, whether we silence ourselves before or after the taping, we import an ancient literate tradition of textual integrity into a new medium. And when it comes to the interpretation of the new kind of text, we are likely to do that only on the far side of the division between disk and liner notes, or between a cassette and one of those small pieces of paper that is folded and folded still smaller until it can be squeezed inside a cassette holder.

Similar decisions are made in the production of films and videos intended for educational purposes. Again the fieldworkers (and now their crews) are likely to be edited out of the text proper, becoming both inaudible and invisible. Interpretation, or at least a little of it, may find its way out of writing and into the loudspeaker or onto the screen, but it will still be kept apart from the time and place of the performance. The voice of a commentator may overlap with the scene of the text, but it will be disembodied, as clearly separated from the text as an introduction or footnotes. When there are scenes that illustrate the world projected by the speaker, they are likely to come before or after the text itself. The irony is that the more unstintingly the audience is treated to what performance studies would take to be the "real" thing, in this case a talking head (and maybe a torso), the less intelligible the world projected by the text will be. If the performance is a long one, they will have forgotten some of what they read about it in a booklet (or were told or shown about it) by the time they get to the relevant sequences, or they will forget the sequences by the time they get to the explanations.

The Palimpsest and the Mirror

Having taken us this far, I'm going to make still more trouble by raising the difference between the audience of the performer and that of the fieldworker to the point where they speak and understand separate languages, perhaps even unrelated languages. Even before coming to this point we might have encountered problems of dialect, slang, or argot of the sort that require interlingual translation, but at the interlingual level we're going to have to translate
every phrase. If we do this in the customary way, following the model of rigid separation between past text and present interpretation, we will treat the translation as a text in its own right. In the case where the original performance is represented by means of writing—a representation we designate, oddly enough, as the "original text"—we may insert the translation (or the first stage of it) between the lines, creating a quasi palimpsest. Or we may place the translation on odd-numbered pages, mirroring the even-numbered pages of the original.

Whether we choose the palimpsest or the mirror, custom demands that anything we may want to write that cannot be matched with the original text by one of these two means should be considered interpretation, to be kept as separate from the translation as it is from the text. The trouble with this procedure is that the world of a distant text remains a strange one even after translation. Now our readers will have a harder time than ever as they try to keep their grip on the argument or plot while flipping back and forth in search of interpretation. The choice of a straight prose or verse format, without performance notations, is especially self-defeating. Of all the features of oratory and storytelling, it is precisely suspenseful pauses, sudden shouts or prolonged whispers, harsh or gentle tones, and gestures showing direction or size or shape that are the easiest to translate.

Sound recordings of spoken performances in languages other than our own are rarely published (especially as compared with musical performances); when they are, the distance between original and translation is usually that between recording and liner notes. The notes, although they could include a libretto scored in such a way as to make it easy to follow, are more likely to offer a translation whose relationship to the recording is something of a mystery. A voice-under or voice-over translation could be dubbed in, creating an auditory palimpsest, but this is seldom done except in broadcasts. When oral renditions of translations are included in recordings, they are usually kept on separate bands or relegated to the flip side.

Film and video offer the possibility of a palimpsest in the form of a dubbed translation synchronized with the picture (in which case the original text would be reduced to gestures and facial movements), or else the transformation of what would otherwise be a facing-page translation into subtitles. But more often than not the past makers of ethnographic films and tapes have tended toward ethology rather than ethnology, producing nature films in which exotic members of the human species utter colorful cries whose import may or may not be summarized by a voice-over commentator. When there are subtitles they are even more abbreviated than the subtitles of art cinema; any viewer can tell, without any knowledge of the language on the sound track, that something has been left out.

Dubbing works best where languages and cultures are reasonably close. As distances increase, so does the frequency of gross mismatches between the shapes of the speaker’s mouth and the voice on the sound track; still worse,
the speaker may need only a single word to say something that requires a whole sentence in our language, or vice versa. On the page this sort of problem can be solved by adding more white space in one place and crowding the words in another, but there is no way to add or subtract time in synchronized dubbing, short of re-shooting or cutting the performance itself. A larger problem with dubbing is that it creates anachronisms and, along with them, what might be called anatopisms. We hear our own language being spoken at times and in places where it would never be spoken.

The problem with subtitles—and we have all experienced it—is that the visual field in which they are placed not only divides our attention, but divides it between two quite different tasks. As long as the dialogue being translated doesn’t move too fast or go on too long without a break, as long as the language has at least a few common words that are cognate with our own, and as long as the visual context helps us understand what is being said, subtitles can work tolerably well. But when an orator or storyteller speaks fluently and at length, projecting a world that may be quite removed from the one on the screen, we will miss, at any given moment, part of what happens in the picture proper or else part of what is written across its lower margin. If the subtitles for such a performance were as thorough as a translation printed between lines or on odd-numbered pages, they would reach halfway up the screen or even higher. We would find it difficult to finish reading before the words moved on—unless, that is, we concentrated solely on reading, at which point we might as well be reading a libretto while listening to a tape.

The various impasses we’ve been encountering, wherever they may be located on the road that connects text with interpretation, and whatever combination of reading, listening, and viewing may bring us to them, are really the same impasse. The more we attend the chronology of the performance, the progress of its phonemes and syntax, the unfolding of its argument or plot, the less we can apprehend its topology, the depths of its resonances and breadths of its references, the contours of its contents and characters. And the more we attend to topology, the more chronology escapes us. In a translation cast as a text in its own right, the impasse awaits us even before we get as far as interpretation. The reason for this is that however much our translation may gain an internal movement of its own, it is, at any given moment, in a topological relationship with the movement of the original text.

Our problem cannot be eliminated by correcting flaws in our methodology, nor will it vanish with further advances in communications technology. Even when we make a headlong assault on the problem, attempting the exhaustive representation, translation, and interpretation of a performance, our readers, listeners, and viewers will remain as unable as ourselves to devote full and simultaneous attention to chronology and topology. Our proffered representation and the world it projects will undergo apparent changes of movement and shape each time we change the perspective or vector of our interpretation. What we are up against is a principle internal to language use itself. It is our very own uncertainty principle, and that is what we might as well call it.
Of course it is not only the makers, readers, listeners, and viewers of books, tapes, and films who are affected by the linguistic uncertainty principle, but oral performers and their audiences as well. The difference is that while some of the speeches that get made or stories that get told within an oral tradition bear a resemblance to original texts even before we come along and make them into original texts, there are many others that do not. Oral discourse of the kind that is recited verbatim is already like a text in the particular sense that any questions of interpretation not answered within that discourse must wait for a separate occasion. The longer such a discourse is passed down through time without internal alterations, the more it will stand in need of external interpretation—unless the audience comes to accept it as purely liturgical, deriving its meaning solely from the context of its actual performance.

But far more typical of oral cultures than verbatim recitation are open modes of praying, orating, and storytelling whose wording, phrasing, and voicing, though they may be somewhat formal or even archaic, allow improvisation and innovation, and whose larger structures allow shifting proportions between chronology and topology and provide for the addition of remarks appropriate to particular occasions. Open modes enable the speaker to perform a dance with uncertainty, raising the tension between movements and moments while at the same time keeping them together in the same imaginable world. A curious detail may make sense only in terms of later action, or a surprising action may make better sense when further details are revealed. When we find ourselves hanging on the next word, uncertainty itself is made manifest.

Speakers using open modes may expect the audience to make comments, ask questions, or fill in key words from time to time, thus taking more than a merely implicit role in the shaping of a performance. When we are present for such an occasion in our roles as fieldworkers, performers may even ignore our customary injunction to act as if we weren’t there and instead develop their discourse in such a way as to improve the chances that we might actually understand it rather than remaining content to make a record of its outward forms. They may even take the further step of refusing to proceed unless we ourselves say something from time to time, thus adding our voices to what we had been thinking of as their text.

By this time a good many of us are quite ready to be heard here and there on tape, read here and there in a transcript or translation, or glimpsed on camera. But moves of this sort will remain mere compensatory gestures so long as we see them merely as a means of constructing a still more “realistic” text, a text we meanwhile continue to keep at a long spatial and/or temporal interval from interpretation. If the original performers didn’t relegate all their interpretive discourse to prologues and epilogues, why should we? If our voices mingled with their voices then, why can’t they mingle now? And if, while we were translating, we thought of two quite different renditions of the same passage, each with its own merits, why should we follow the model of the palimpsest or the mirror and decide on only one?
Allowing our voices to enter the space and time of the text (if text is still the word for it), or allowing the voices of the text to enter the space and time of our interpretation, doesn’t mean the leveling of differences. It doesn’t mean joining the ranks of those who publish collections of folklore “as retold by” themselves; such authors usually operate at a great distance from the problems of textualization, translation, and interpretation that concern us here, producing an even-textured discourse that disguises interpolations and blurs voices. Instead, the interaction of text and interpretation can have the opposite effect, leading to a heightened perception of voices.

The trick worth learning, I think, is to tell the story of what performers have said and done while at the same time letting their performances go on telling a story, and to do this not by separating voices between different passages or sequences but by letting different voices be heard within each passage or segment. Fiction writers are quite accomplished at this sort of thing, and we have a great deal to learn from them. But we also have a great deal to learn from the performers who allowed us to tape, film, and question them in the field. They have their own ways of constructing multivocal discourse, their own ways of telling, quoting, intervening, digressing, and moving on again.

Mayan Modes of Textualization

To a great extent, my questioning of the projects of textualization, translation, and interpretation has been occasioned by my own ongoing fieldwork among the Quiché Maya of Guatemala, together with my attempts, back home, to hear, write, read, and recite Mayan speeches and stories. When it comes to the processes by which their own discourse might be represented, edited, and expounded upon, Mayan peoples have habits and notions quite different from ours. No doubt the same can be said for any number of other peoples, but what makes Mayan practice particularly interesting is that writing, even in the strictest sense of the term, has been present in their world for better than two thousand years. The characters of the Mayan script were replaced by those of the Roman alphabet in the 16th and 17th centuries, but the aftereffects of Mayan modes of textualization can be traced in alphabetic texts and in contemporary oral discourse.

Mayan hieroglyphic writing allowed the sowing, within the same visible field of discourse, of phonetic, iconic, and indexical signs, many of them calling for multiple interpretations. It is quite unlikely that two different reciters of the “same” hieroglyphic text, or even the same reader on two different occasions, said exactly the same thing—or at least what we mean by the same thing. Sometimes characters were written with phonetic notations that made them legible in either of two Mayan languages (Closs 1987). Even when alphabetic writing came along, demanding a monocropping of the visible field of discourse, the 16th-century Quiché writers who undertook the transcription of the Popol Vuh, a hieroglyphic book, did not produce a glyph-by-glyph
reading of the original but interwove their alphabetic version with their own explanations, speculations, and disclaimers, together with allusions to recent events (Tedlock 1983: chapt. 12; 1985:32–33, 59). Among the Maya of Yucatán, alphabetic versions of the ancient Book of Chilam Balam were revised and augmented all the way down to the 19th century (Roys 1967:3–7).

Even when moving entirely within the alphabetic field, Quiché writers did not (and do not) take advantage of the editorial opportunity to make a repeated discourse match its source on a word-for-word basis. When they represent a character in a narrative as quoting what another character has already said, they routinely reword and rephrase the original statement, even when it comes from the mouths of the very gods. A similar process takes place in the brocading of textiles, which is classified as a form of writing; when a motif is repeated, it is varied in its internal design or in its placement in a sequence (Tedlock and Tedlock 1985). When scripts for centuries-old dramas are recopied, newly composed speeches are inserted and old ones are altered or left out (Bode 1961:220–226). Printed books are slowly revised with scissors and paste; they are given new covers in the form of collages, and cutout texts from other sources are mounted with glue on their very pages.

When fieldworkers seek help in transcribing tapes of Quiché oral narratives, their informants, even when they have been instructed to repeat just what they hear from the machine, may rephrase what comes off the tape, insert lines that were not there at all, and, wherever there are words or phrases of obvious Spanish origin, replace them with Quiché ones. Not only that, but the very people who allowed themselves to be recorded may not accept what is on a tape as an authoritative version of what they said in the first place. We seem to have entered a world where every act of representation is also an act of interpretation. (These days, of course, it has been dawning on a lot of us that we have been living in just such a world all along.)

In the Mayan world in general, a great value is placed on the ground from which all discourse arises and the ground to which it must return if it is to remain discourse, which is the ground of dialogue. The question of the authority of a “text” is not independent of the question as to whether and how that text might be viable in the ongoing world of dialogue, where the time and place and audience are never quite the same as on any prior occasion. A Mayan is unlikely to tell a story to a fieldworker in the first place unless the conversation already under way seems to demand a particular story, and unless it seems possible for the fieldworker to understand that story on the spot (Burns 1980; Tedlock 1983: chapt. 10). You can’t just say, “Tell me a story, any story,” or “Tell it in your language and I’ll get it translated later.” Once the story is under way the fieldworker is expected to respond, even to the extent of commenting or asking questions, and thus becomes involved on both sides of the process of textualization. And when the tape is replayed it’s not at all clear where to make the cuts, how to decide precisely where the story began and ended, so thoroughly has it been woven into the longer fabric of the conversation.
Nor is the showing through of the dialogical ground limited to narratives. Even prayers expand and contract and have their moments of self-interpretation, and even they have openings for other speakers. When people busy praying at a Quiché shrine see a friend walk up, they leave their semi-private discourse dangling in midair long enough to engage in an exchange of friendly greetings. When a hired prayermaker needs to insert the full names of his clients or their ancestors or other personal information into his speech or chant, he doesn’t compile his facts in advance but rather stops at precisely the places where he needs them, turning to his clients with questions and then picking up where he left off.

But now it’s time for me to offer a Quiché story, and a prayer, and time to tell the story of how they came to be spoken and show where they might arrive in the process of textualization. In the process I will be dragged into the texts, as you will see, and I will interrupt the already interpreted texts in order to further interpret them. If I were reading all this aloud to you, I would doubtless depart from my prepared text.

**Signs of the Holy World**

Just a week ago a diviner named Mateo Uz Abaj had tried to guide us to a shrine mentioned in the Popol Vuh, Dawning Point, the mountaintop where the Quiché people witnessed the first of all dawns. I had called a halt to that trip when he pointed us up a steepening slope that threatened to stall our jeep and leave us with no possibility of turning around without turning over.

Now, with the day Seven Jaguar going out and Eight Bird coming in, Barbara and I sat in don Mateo’s house on the outskirts of the town called Middle of the Flowers. It was the eve of our trip to another shrine, this one on top of the mountain named Thunderer. But don Mateo still had Dawning Point on his mind, and he told us the story of his boyhood visit there. It wasn’t the first time he’d told this story, but this time we got it on tape.

The voice that comes out of the machine now, into my wallpapered room with rugs and upholstered furniture, carries the resonance of the room where he spoke, with ceiling of planks across bare beams and walls of stuccoed adobe bricks. Nothing to soften the sound, just crepe-paper streamers, hung in scallops over our heads. Just the small pine table that serves as his altar, a few chairs and stools of pine, and a cleanly sawed-off stump. And the sound behind the voice is a night sound, a cold and dry December night with everything closed up, no chickens outside, no one walking or driving past on the gravel road out front, the rest of the family already off in the kitchen and quiet, staying close to the fire while we hunch ourselves against the chill, sitting still on bare wood for don Mateo, who talks a lot.

And he mostly talks Spanish tonight, he’s too hot for what he has to say to let himself be led into a conversation that might go down the slow and halting path of a language lesson, once his gringo guests ran out of things they’d al-
ready learned to say in Quiché. But he doesn't translate the place name I've been giving as Dawning Point; for him it's always Saqirib'al, not "El Sitio del Alba." He's already spoken the name by the time the sound starts coming off the tape, but I can hear his voice quite clearly in my mind's ear. He speaks a highly clipped dialect of Quiché, so Saqirib'al always comes out as Squirib'al, sounds almost like "Scribble." He's been showing us some of the stones he keeps on the lower shelf of his altar, close to the earthen floor, stones that have mouths, stones that like strong drink and the light and scent of burning offerings, stones that like the sound of words. He's told us that one of them came from Scribble. The first intelligible words from the tape are these:

We went to sleep just a little above there.
There's no—ssssssshhhhhhhhhhh!
GET DOWN!

He doesn't want to be bothered by his dog just now.

There's nothing there today, just a little farm
and in the middle of the night cars were coming
we suddenly heard cars and we all woke up
but there's no highway there, there's nothing

but cars came rrerrrrrrrr another one, another one,

another one, another one.
Afterwards airplanes came, well
they came down where that hearth is.

He's talking about a hearth for burning offerings, porob'al, a shrine, awas, a spot you mustn't touch with your hand.

They all came down there.
And they all went away, some went up, some down, they all left
and we were watching to see what—
what they were doing, well—
whether people would get out of the cars, but we didn't see any thing
just noises, nothing more.
Then
we were wide awake, well, we were a bit startled.

Now a car is approaching on the road outside, late at night in this lonely place where don Mateo is talking—but this is the kind of car that leaves its sound on a tape. Someone in the story (perhaps don Mateo is quoting himself) says,

"What could this be?"
Then my papa said, since he
already knew about such things

and here don Mateo changes voices, sounds like a kindly father reassuring his
children while the car comes nearer,

"Don't worry about this.
This is the Holy World, . . .

it's the Santo Mundo, Saint Earth, Diosmundo, Earth Deity, and at this point
the car on the tape goes roaring right past the house,

. . . these are
the chiefs . . .

earth angels, terrestrial saints, distant mountain peaks, taking the forms of hu-
man beings,

. . . who come to
see the customs being done, . . .

who come to see orange flames of copal incense, yellow flames of tallow can-
dles, to smell the smoke of resin, smoke of fat, ringed with pine needles and
petals of red and white roses, who come to taste strong liquor, to hear their
names spoken,

. . . they are
presenting themselves to the people.
Don't worry.
It's as if we offered them a meal and they came to try it.
Don't worry.
It's as if they liked the table we set."

These are the words that come out of the speaker when the tape slides across
the head, or the words I hear in my mind's ear, spoken by an inner voice that
sounds the way don Mateo would sound if he could speak English, as he him-
self gives voice in Spanish to the words his father once spoke in Quiché, words
he can still hear in his own mind's ear, spoken by an inner voice that sounds
like his father, a voice that interprets what the narrative voice had just de-
scribed. Then another voice (perhaps don Mateo himself again) answers his
father,

"That's good."
And we were only there a little while when a woman
a woman who went there with us, my brother’s woman

and now he tells us something he must’ve heard her say later, but this time, instead of giving voice to her, he gives voice to the Narrator who stands within all of us, that third person who only speaks of what others sense, what others do, saying,

she saw a fire like so
of this size

and here he holds his hands, or Narrator’s hands, with the palms facing each other, slightly cupped, one about two feet above the other, and

a fire came out, it was about
ten yards from where we were

“we,” he says, he’s almost taking the story away from Narrator, but he’s not giving it back to the woman who saw the fire, but to himself and all the others who were “we” that night, and

the fire came out and
rose up, a flame like so:
Ee! it went.

He raises his right fist in front of him, keeping the folded fingers in front, and when it reaches higher than his head he bursts it open on “Ee!” Fingers slowly close, hand comes back down, then

Ee! it went again
but it wasn’t like the
glow of

and here the resonance of his voice changes as he turns aside to look at the only light in the room,

a candle—what it was, was a fire somewhat
the color of
what’s it called?

Here he pauses longer than usual, waiting for an answer that might come from someone in his audience, but then he finds it on his own:

➤ ➤ ➤
Corundum.
Aluminum oxide with iron in it, the same stuff rubies are made of.

Yes indeed,
it came up high
it was seen clear overhead.

With that he shifts to another voice—not back to his own, nor to that of the woman who saw the fire that night, but to the voice of all of "us" who speak to all of "you" about what we should all know and do, the voice of collective wisdom:

It’s good when you see the fire
you shouldn’t tell anyone about it, not even a companion
whether it be your brother, your papa, whether it be
your woman, whoever it might be.
You mustn’t talk with anyone, just keep it to yourself.
"Let’s see what happens," as the saying goes.

Then comes another voice, as he tells us what he sees in his mind’s eye right now but we can’t see, something he should keep to himself if he’s really seeing it, and he does indeed fade out:

Well, little by little this fire is going out, going out, going out, . . .

as he holds his hand out in front of him, palm down, and lowers it little by little, leaning forward to have a better look, to follow the fire going out, going out as it floats toward the earth, then he stops with his face as low as his knees, staring straight down at the back of his hand, palm almost touching the floor, right on top of

. . . this
here, and when there’s a—

whatever it is, a "—," a silence, the white of the page, something that can’t be named, waiting to be caught on the floor under his palm,

you grab it . . .

he closes his fist around the thing on the floor,

. . . and there’s nothing there.
Then you look at the place where it went out—
and it left you a sign there.
The fire left a sign by letting you see where it went out, like an animal crossing
your path in the woods and then disappearing again.

And if you have a hat, you leave a hat there, or if you’re a woman
you leave a scarf or something else there.
Then, when dawn comes, there it is—

you make the sign stand still—or perhaps it’s more like giving it a way to hide
itself. You’re a dreamer marking the spot where something just happened,
planning to find it again in the morning, and

there’s the sign—well, the place to dig, there’s a fortune.

He’s whispering those last words, almost choking off the final syllable, and if
something like this should ever happen to you, keep it at least that quiet.

Yes, oh yes.

With “yes” he hints at an opening, hints at the hope of some response. The
tape has my own voice saying, “Where it went out?” and don Mateo begins
reinterpreting what he already said:

Yes, where the little fire went out.

Then I say, “You have to cover it,” and don Mateo, motioning toward the
invisible spot on the floor, says,

There, with a hat.
If it weren’t for the hat it’d all be for nothing.
It’s to see, later, where to dig.

Then he offers some collective wisdom he left out the first time through:

You mustn’t talk about it with anyone
until another day, then
you can talk.
And you have to do a custom there like the other customs
that we have:
you have to put a
c a n d l e . . .

and he holds this unseen candle between his right thumb and forefinger and
stands it on the floor at the right spot, now a hole where the treasure once was,
... like so

and Barbara's voice comes in here, "Incense," she suggests, and don Mateo says,

Incense,

everything.

Then it'll still

still be there, the fortune won't go away.

The treasure is in danger, even after it's been taken home. The Holy World has one more hungry mouth than before, the mouth that gave up the treasure.

Yes.

And if not, it'll turn into

turn into cinders.

And here I say, "Aha," and then, having already heard a few things about the proper care of treasure from someone else, I add, "If it weren't valued, it would decay."

Yes.

And when you went to see it, money is not what it'd be.

It'd be cinders.

"Money" is the quick gloss the translator inside me puts on Spanish dinero, but dinero is already the quick gloss the translator inside don Mateo has put on Quiché pwaq, and pwaq rings with metal in the Quiché ear even quicker than money might ring in ours. Pwaq is metal, especially precious metal, and pwaq of the greatest value is the kind that gives itself away, letting itself be noticed on the ground right in front of someone, or pointing to its hiding place with a sudden sign. It could be an old silver coin or a ring, but there are other things that have a ring to them, that bear the marks of great heat: meteorites, fulgurites, volcanic concretions, things in the shape of small animals, ears of corn, squashes, all of them smelted when Sun came up in person on the first of all mornings. Such pwaq is kept hidden at home and never spent. It is Uk'ux Pwaq, the very "Heart of Metal."

Now don Mateo pauses longer than usual, but instead of cleanly ending his story he comes back around to speaking of the place where it happened:

► ► ►

This is in the township of St. Andrew Plaster House.

And then he speaks as "we" again, only this time it's "we" who are seated in his front room, we who were headed for the place he's been talking about until I thought our jeep might turn over:
It's higher up than where we were last week
► ► ►
and the lady who saw this—
I don't know where she is.
She doesn't have her family here

and the tape we made when the day Seven Jaguar was on its way out and Eight Bird was coming in goes on a little longer, but something's buzzing inside the darkening room where I listen to don Mateo's voice, where I tap away at my keyboard. A wasp climbs the screen of my monitor, headed for the place where I've lit up the words "St. Andrew Plaster House," bright amber on dark gray. I stop it before it gets there.

A Word for the Holy World

The outlines of mounds can be traced on the peak named Thunderer, beneath the trees and in the clearing, strewn about are slabs of gray basalt, quarried nearby, and silvery schist from somewhere to the north. After the first of all dawns, when the god, the daimon known as Thunderer turned to stone, his arbor of bromeliads and hanging mosses was replaced by a temple, and a few houses were built for people who came up here on retreats.

By now the very ruins have been ruined, the stones so disturbed it's hard to trace out the line of a single wall, much less a room. On the cloudy day Eight Bird, a man from Middle of the Flowers, accompanied by his children and his ethnographers, approaches the rim of an old dynamite crater, blasted by treasure hunters. The crater itself has been disturbed, it takes a practiced eye to recognize it for what it is. Here and there around the mountaintop today we see discarded wrappers from packets of copal incense, and even as we enter the sacred precinct of the crater we can smell the untouchable place at its center, the heavy smell of the damp ashes and resinous soot of old offerings. The hearth, reconstructed since the blast was set off in the old one, is open to the west and bordered on the other three sides by rubble. A long stick is handy, left at the edge of this hearth by previous visitors, and at every other hearth in all these Guatemalan mountains, good for stirring pieces of incense to make sure they burn completely.

Looters looking for a priceless idol would never know which of the stones in this shrine might be the one haunted by the daimon of the place, the stone with a gape, with lips that like to be wet with strong liquor and sometimes get a taste of hot blood from a hen with her head cut off. Such a stone might look slightly like the head of a snake, tapered toward the mouth, and where there was once a bubble in the molten rock there might be a cavity in the right place for an eye. Or it might look a little like a human head, tapered toward the chin, with parallel ridges across its face at the right levels for a brow ridge, cheek bones, and lower lip. The one thing they all have in common, other than the
fact that they are difficult to put into words, is an edge or crease or cavity that could be called a mouth.

As for the stones in this shrine, don Mateo looks at them with the eye of a diviner and points out the one with the mouth as if it were completely obvious. We unwrap our offerings and lay them out along the open side of the hearth, and before long it looks as though a banquet were being set for the Holy World, with the courses laid out in the order in which they should be eaten.

Don Mateo starts talking even while he puts a few last things in place and checks for matches in his pocket. He prays fast and long, breathlessly as can be, he leaves a silence only, breathes in only when he comes to the very end of his breath, it's as if he were writing a long run of prose with hardly ever an indentation. What he says when he prays takes its shapes from the little rise in pitch that begins each phrase and the little fall that ends it, but everything in between returns to his monotone, the level he keeps all the way from beginning to end, it's all one single sentence that never seems to end, it's all one long soft mutter unless we tune in when he gets a little louder, or slows down slightly, or the breeze shifts and carries the words our way, or else we lean and strain one ear in his direction. We try to hear at least a little of what he says in the long pauses that break up our own attempts at a few lines of prayer, and then again in that longest pause that comes when we've run out of lines, the lines we've memorized, words he himself and other diviners have given us to speak for ourselves.

We try to hear don Mateo, but after all, we're not the ones he's talking to right now, he looks like he's talking to nothing but thin air on an empty mountaintop, but he names, he calls upon an unseen host, and we catch a few of the names, or something sounds so familiar we don't even need to hear each syllable clearly, or he says it exactly when and where we'd expect to hear it, near the beginning he says pardon my trespass, pardon a mere human being for presuming to stand on this holy ground, on this holy, this beloved day, this day of the Lord Eight Bird, this fifth of December, and he takes a pair of long wax candles and holds them up never stopping, here is my stake, my present, here is the thing I'll stand on the ground before ye, and now he begins to name his Holy Quaternity, Holy King of the World, his head is tilted a little skyward, Holy Savior of the World, he looks out level here, Holy Creator of the World, his gaze includes the ground before him here, Holy Martin of the World, we don't know which St. Martin this is but he says it's St. Martin who holds us all from below, and he holds two candles in one hand, one crossing the other to make an X, the same two candles he held this morning, touching the glass of the door where the semblance of St. John looks out from inside the tabernacle on top of his altar at home, and now he touches this cross of wax to the face of the stone that has the mouth, and talking on and on he lights these candles, softening the end of one with the flame of the other, and stands them up on a slab of stone that rests on the holy earthen hearth before the mouth, the ground he must not touch with his hand, between the thighs of the World, and we set
out our candles too, he's ending this part of his prayer but not his one long sentence by raising his voice, not bringing it down, using the word for the one we call Our Father for the first time, using the word the only way he'll ever use it, God becomes the one to mark off paragraphs, God becomes the cry of affliction, God comes just before we catch our breath, we hear the short stretch of silence that comes when don Mateo says, O God—

And then he says and furthermore, and here he takes up candles of tallow, not smooth and innocent candles made of wax but sticky candles made of the fat of slaughtered pigs, come hither, Mary Tecum, he summons a mountain west of here, or the lady who rules that mountain, she's Mary Tecum, half her name from the one we call the Virgin, the other half she shares with Tecum Umam, the man who shot Alvarado's horse from under him, and another mountain, World of don Manuel, every mountain a microcosm, World of don Juan, and all along don Mateo lights whole bunches of tallow candles, he lets them burn lying down on the holy ground and we put down our candles too, World of don Pascual, a mountain whose summit shrine has the Pascual Rock, carved with eyes and nose and mouth, arms crossed like a pair of candles, World of don Diego, wherever that may be, and a giant, Golden Earthquake, Shining Earthquake, the lord within another mountain, the one who had his ankles tied to his wrists by Markusman and Little Hidden Sun, and on with the names of every mountain, every world in Guatemala if don Mateo only knew them, and Red Sparkstriker, White Sparkstriker, whose ax of flint strikes lightning that moves in the blood of diviners, who predicted Tecum Umam's defeat by Alvarado, who never got baptized, red daimon who gives riches in dreams and dark places, who reveals the locations of stones with mouths—we hear a blast from the horn of a truck.

"What's that?" says don Mateo in his normal voice, turning his head toward the road where we left the jeep. Now we all hear that the truck did not stop but is still on its way over the ridge from Holy Cross to St. Andrew, from Many Trees to Plaster House, and don Mateo continues as if he's never been interrupted, his mood is the same as if he'd never wondered whether someone might get curious about what the people from the jeep might be up to, he names the Two Archangels, Thunderbolt St. Gabriel, Thunderbolt St. Michael, lightning, storm, the entering darkness, O God—

And again he says and furthermore, here are my little tamales, here are my gourds of gruel, and begins to unfold the leaves that wrap the copal in packets, King Quiché, the last Quiché king to rule the mountains and plains around us, and he takes the small round cakes of incense one by one, King Tecum, whose spirit familiar, whose genius was a quetzal, last seen flying over the battlefield where Alvarado killed him, and he tosses a piece of copal on the hearth for the flames of the tallow candles to feed on, King Monarch, King Montezuma, the man who was king in faraway Mexico, we smell the incense, smoke of the blood of trees, we untie our own copal, eight hundred churches, churches with graves beneath their floors, eight hundred cemeteries, each on its own holy hill, eight
hundred angels of glory, angels who once had flesh and blood, and here come the Four Apostles, St. Peter, by his key he's the patron of all who divine, St. John, St. Paul, St. Bartholomew, all of these were once human beings, First Lord Mayor, Second Lord Mayor of the blessed souls in the place of flesa, "purgatorio," it's purgatory he means, he salutes the sparks in the dripping caves below, sparks that may one day sprout from the earth, stars on the rise, First Prison, Second Prison, First Key, Second Key, on the First Table, the Second Table, and all the names of the dead are recorded somewhere, in the First Book, in the Second Book, on the First Shelf, on the Second Shelf, the deep orange flames from the resin reach up high, who knows how high the soot-black smoke ascends, and all grandmotherfathers in common, all motherfathers in common, however many souls of the dead there may be, the smoke stains our clothes, O God—

And again he says and furthermore, and here he brings out a bottle of boodeg liquor, hear our request, he sprinkles the open-mouthed stone that stands in the shrine, do me a favor, he turns to each of us in turn, along with our companions here, our neighbors here, and he cuts to his normal voice, turns to one of the ethnographers, "your name?"

He knows our names but asks us anyway, gives us each a place in his prayer, Barbara Tet-lok, "and yours?" Dionisio Tet-lok, as if he were entering our names in a form, give us our house, our land, our animals, our business, our car, our airplane, our clothes, O God—

And yet again he says, and furthermore, perhaps some neighbor, some companion piled up words behind our legs, behind our arms, made thirteen prayers, thirteen words, thirteen speeches, spoke through the breeze, spoke through the chill, spoke through the clouds, set up stakes, handed out presents, asked that pain come into us, asked that my animals die, asked that my animals disappear, the pig I had, O God—

So he's got something on his mind. Three days ago he found the corpse of his prize pig, his perfectly healthy pig, and again he says and furthermore, and here he must've used the words he gave me as a gift, told me to write in my notebook, words to ask for justice, may my neighbor, may my companion be delivered into the hands of St. Peter and St. Paul and St. Bartholomew, and the Holy King of the World, and the Holy Savior of the World, and the Holy Creator of the World, and Holy Martin of the World, and Mary Teum, don Manuel, don Juan, don Pascual, don Diego, I give a present before ye all, I remember the thunderbolt, flash, storm, entering night, come St. Gabriel, come St. Michael, raymasters, O God—

And the way don Mateo ends a prayer is easy to remember, he says, and furthermore, may this confession he received, this petition, in the day, in the light, let it be done at 6:00 in the morning, at 7:00, at 8:00, at 9:00, at 10:00, at 11:00, at 12:00 noon, at 1:00 in the afternoon, at 2:00, at 3:00, at 4:00, at 5:00, at 6:00, at 7:00 in the evening, at 8:00, at 9:00, at 10:00, and at 11:00, and midnight, the very center of darkness, and at 1:00 in the morning, and at 2:00 in the morning, at 3:00, at 4:00, at 5:00, at 6:00 in the morning, the sum total of twenty-four hours, in the World, the earth, the chill, the breeze, all worlds together, and thanks be to the World, and
here he says kintoj, "I'm making payment," toj, "to pay," Toj, the name of the day that came six days ago, the day the god of this mountain was named for, Toji, "he who has the quality of Toj," whose resonant name is Thunderer, Tojikil, and now don Mateo drops his voice, ends his one long sentence, I'm making payment to all the mouths of the World together, one word, one speech.

Notes

The earliest version of this text was presented, in September of 1988, to the participants in a symposium at the State University of New York at Buffalo, organized by Bruce Jackson and Diane Christian and titled "Editing Reality." Revised versions have since been presented to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan, and the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University. The last two sections are from a larger work in progress, Breath as the Mirror.

1 Not all discourse is meant to be interpretable, however—or at least not in any ordinary sense of the word. A case in point is that of the curing songs of the Suyá, "whose object is less to be heard and understood than to be performed and seen" (Seeger 1966:78).

2 In the case of the Qur'an, in contrast with that of the Bible, "present" discourse is limited to the oral interpretation of the text itself; other forms of interpretation, including both translation and hermeneutics, are excluded. There is a well-developed art of recitation that offers choices in such matters as the timing of pauses, so that the same passage can be made to mean different things on different occasions (Nelson 1985:chap. 2).

3 Intentional contours, the timing of pauses, and parallel phrasing sometimes coincide, but in spoken (as contrasted with chanted) narrative they often operate as three independent variables. This has been demonstrated in detail for the Kuna (Sherzer 1987), Quiché Maya (Tedlock 1987), Uruwik Eskimo (Woodbury 1987), and Zuni (Tedlock 1983:49–61, 211–213), and it has been remarked in passing for the Sahaptin (Hymes 1987:67).

4 The experimental visual effects of Russian futurist writing were often keyed to oral performance (Janacek 1984). On projective verse see Olson (1966:15–26).


6 In the course of a mere quarter of an hour, a single speaker can produce scores of distinguishable voices; see Hill (1983).

7 For a remarkable exception, see the video (and monograph) by Connor et al. (1986). The fieldworker is present not only for interview sessions but during performance scenes as well, and there is an interpretive scene in which the performer comments while watching a video replay of one of her own performances.

8 A radical approach to voice-over commentary is followed in Roth's film about migrant laborers in West Africa, Jagoa (1967), which is entirely without synchronized sound. Two of the actors in the film, Demoué Ziba and Lam Ibrahim Dja, narrate their own actions, complete with improvised dialogue.

9 Evers ran into this problem while editing films of various Southwestern Indian verbal performances and decided in favor of shortened subtitles (personal communication); the films are now available as videos (Evers 1986).

10 Glassie went a long way in this direction in Passing the Time in Ballymenone (1982b), though he didn't go as far as he might have in bringing out distinct voices. What is gained by placing texts within a narrative frame may be seen by comparing the stories in Passing the Time with the very same stories in Irish Folk History (Glassie 1982a), where only the texts themselves are given. Narayan, in Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels (1989), weaves story texts so thoroughly into a larger narrative as to form a sort of tapestry.

11 By writing "in the strictest sense" I mean a graphic system with signs that correspond to the sounds of a language, independently of the words those sounds may occur in. It is now well established that the ancient
Mayan script included not only logographs (signs for particular words) but a complete inventory of signs for syllables as well; for a concise and up-to-date introduction to the script, see Schele and Miller (1984: 317–328).

To the story, short pauses (one second or a little less) are indicated by line changes and longer pauses (a second and a half to two seconds) by arrows ▶ ▶ ▶. A complete intonational contour, ended by a steep drop in pitch, is marked by a period, and a shallower drop by a comma. At the end of a line a lack of punctuation indicates that a contour is broken off, while a dash indicates an emphatic incompleteness, marked by a deliberate rise. Boldface type calls for a relatively loud voice, small caps calls for a soft voice, and SMALL CAPS call for a loud whisper. Words that are p, a, e, o, u should be pronounced slowly and precisely.

References Cited


