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Ensayo

# Return of the Phoenix: Love and Revolution in Asturias's *El señor presidente* and Argueta's *Un día en la vida* de Manlio Argueta

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**All quotations in English referring to Miguel Angel Asturias's *El señor Presidente* and Manlio Argueta's *Un día en la vida* have been done by myself. Lois Marie Jaeck. Having written this paper in English, I have chosen sometimes to quote my English translations of Asturias's and Argueta's original Spanish texts within my sentences, in order to maintain the linguistic flow of my text. Because my translations are unpublished except for this paper, I refer to the page number of the original Spanish versions of the text, immediately after my paraphrase or quotation translated into English. To facilitate English-speaking readers who have not read the Spanish texts but are instead referring to the well-known English translations of Frances Partridge (*El Señor Presidente*) and Bill Brow (*One Day of Life*) I have included the pagination of these translations (different from my own) behind the page number referring to the original Spanish texts.**

**El regreso del ave Fénix: amor y revolución en *El señor presidente* de Miguel Ángel Asturias y *Un día en la vida* de Manlio Argueta**

**Resumen.** En *El señor presidente* de Miguel Ángel Asturias tanto como en *Un día en la vida* de Manlio Arguerta, la lucha contra la tiranía se vale tanto del poder que tiene el amor de trascender la muerte como de la capacidad que tiene la revolución social de construir un mundo nuevo de las cenizas de la opresión. Esta fuerza regenerativa que tienen el amor y el espíritu de la revolución social tiene algo que ver con el símbolo mitológico del ave fénix. Yo sugiero que las imágenes repetitivas de pájaros que se hallan en *El señor presidente* y en *Un día en la vida* evocan el ciclo eterno de destrucción y recreación que representa el ave fénix.

**Palabras clave:** El ave fénix, el poder del amor, la revolución social, la metáfora, la regeneración**.**

**Abstract.** The phoenix is an invincible mythological bird that is consumed by fire only to arise again from its own ashes. In Miguel Angel Asturius's *El señor presidente and Manlio Argueta's Un día en la vida*, the regenerative forces enshrined in love and social revolution frequently are linked metaphorically to birds, and thus these metaphors evoke the eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation of the phoenix. In both novels, the struggle to transcend tyranny has as much to do with the power of love to transcend death as with the power of social revolution to construct a new world from the ashes of oppression.

**Key words:** The phoenix, the power of love, social revolution, metaphor, regeneration.

## Introduction

J. E. Cirlot in *A Dictionary of Symbols* states that birds are very frequently used to symbolize human souls, some of the earliest examples being found in the art of ancient Egypt. Sometimes they are depicted with human heads, as in Hellenic iconography. When Mohammed went to heaven, he found [...] the tree of Life [...] surrounded by groves and avenues of leafy trees on whose boughs perch [ed] many birds, brilliantly coloured and singing melodiously; these [were] the souls of the faithful. The souls of evildoers, on the other hand, [were] incarnated in birds of prey [46]. Cirlot specifically describes the phoenix as "a mythical bird about the size of an eagle" who, when it saw death draw near, would make a nest of sweet-smelling wood and resins, which it would expose to the full force of the sun's rays, until it burnt itself to ashes. Another phoenix then would arise from the marrow of its bones (*cf.* 8). Cirlot stresses that, in every respect, the mythological bird symbolizes periodic destruction and re-creation (38), the triumph of eternal life over death (241-42).

While Cara de Ángel's horrific death in the last pages of *El señor presidente* (1946) would appear to have signified the triumph of a sadistic political regime dedicated to torture, terror and tyranny,

the survival of his loving wife and infant son in the countryside clearly inferred hope for that country's future liberation from the President's evil clutches. Miguel Angel Asturias contended that his novel *El señor presidente* was pure fiction; nevertheless events narrated clearly reflected the harsh political reality that Guatemala suffered under the oppressive reign of Estrada Cabrera in the first few years of the twentieth century. Similarly, events in Manlio Argueta's *Un día en la vida* (published in 1980) mirror fifty years of political violence and oppression that culminated in civil war between El Salvador's "rightist" government and "leftist" revolutionaries. In terms of the political reality of El Salvador's civil war, the death of revolutionary Chepe Guardado at the end of *Un día en la vida* did not signify the failure of the revolutionary forces but a strengthening of their resolve to overcome tyranny. Like the image of the surviving child depicted in *El señor presidente*, Chepe's spirit vanquishes death and oblivion as his wife Lupe continues to talk about his achievements in the community in the present tense.

In both novels, the struggle for liberation from tyranny is aligned with the phoenix-like power of love to transcend death, of social revolution to construct a new world from the ashes of oppression. In Argueta's renowned literary masterpiece *Un dia en la vida* as well as in Asturias acclaimed novel *El señor Presidente*, the destructive forces of political oppression as well as the phoenix-like regenerative power of hope, love and social revolution are all linked with images of birds.

## 1. *El señor Presidente*

In *El señor Presidente*, the opening chapters of the novel abound with macabre images of birds evoking the President's oppressive government and the impossibility of transcendence in either earthly or spiritual terms. El Mosco, a blind beggar living on the church steps, protests that the poor are carted to the workhouse like turkeys ("los chumpipes de la fiesta" 18, 13), in order that the President can keep on the good side of the "gringos"(*cf.* 18, 13). The outspoken Mosco later is beaten to death by the Authorities because he won't testify that he "saw" General Canales and the lawyer Carvajal murder Colonel Parrales Sonriente; a crime in fact committed by el Pelele –a mentally deranged beggar who flew into a rage when Parrales insulted his mother. Fleeing the city after committing the murder, el Pelele sinks onto a rubbish heap where black birds of prey hop around his body trying to eat him alive (*cf.* 27, 19), just like the authorities' relentless persecution robs him of life even before they kill him.

Asleep on his rubbish heap, el Pelele dreams about his Mother –his sole memory of love and consolation in an otherwise bleak world. Nestled in her lap, he hears a little bird singing in the pine tree, declaring he is the Rose-Apple of the Bird of Paradise ("La Manzana-Rosa del Ave del Paraíso", 35) who is life –the lie in all things real and the truth in all fiction (35, 24). Like a beautiful flower springing from the rubbish heap of life, el Pelele's mother was for her mentally challenged son a paradise of boundless love and sympathy. Just as her son is a victim of brutal men metaphorically associated with carnivorous birds of prey, she was a victim of the jealousy and vices of his father– a cock-breeder (*cf.* 33, 23).

As if prophesizing Cara de Ángel's conversion from an evil to a good man through the power of love, a woodcutter, without knowing the true identity of the man with whom he is conversing, ironically perceives the President's right hand man as an angel (38, 27), when he meets him near the rubbish heap. Does Cara de Ángel, like el Pelele's mother, enshrine a potentially beautiful soul that transcends the corruption and vice surrounding it? Whereas Cara de Ángel repeatedly is described in the first chapters as beautiful and wicked like Satan ("Era bello y malo como Satán" 53, 37), he also wears a broad brimmed hat that looks like a dove (38, 26), a foreshadow of his future transcendental significance of an evil man converted to the path of righteousness through his love for a good woman. Significantly, his agent of redemption and resurrection (Camila) appears to have come down from the sky (58, 40), as if she were a bird or an angel, the first time that Angel Face encounters her.

Almost all subsequent bird imagery in the novel emphasizes death and torture under the President's dictatorship. After General Canales is falsely accused of Parrales' murder and flees for his life, his house is ransacked by the police, his daughter is kidnapped, and her canary, in the abandoned house is crushed to death (119, 82-83). When Fedina Rodas enters Canales' home to warm the General of plans to murder him, she meets a sight of destruction that leaves her drained of blood, frozen by reality like a bird by buckshot (124, 87). She find the old family servant hysterical and living in a world of make-believe; suffering the effects of having been beaten with an iron bar. Twenty-four hours earlier, La Chabelona had been the soul of a household whose only political activity had been the canary's plots to get to the bird seed (132, 92).

Just after Camila is "rescued" (kidnapped) by Cara de Ángel, who assures her that she is safe, the duplicity of her situation is mirrored in the apparent unnatural suffering of trees being driven crazy by the "itch" of bird

trills, 122,84). The next day, Camila is refused entrance into her uncle's house, who fears what other members of his society will think now that his brother is an outcast. As she walks away, the status quo's defeat of natural familial feeling is echoed in the counterpoint composition of birds greeting the dawn in a celestial concert of musical trills (183, 128), the soft thud of meat being chopped up in the butchers' shops, and the crowing of cocks (183,128, evocative of St. Peter's denial of Jesus Christ.). The ambiance of joyous celebration set against a background of death and dehumanization is further emphasized by a subsequent bird image depicting "zopilotes" (buzzards) pecking each other and fighting over the corpse of a cat (183-84, 128). Whereas Cara de Ángel is described as having black eyes sparkling like a cat's (179, 125), so these "zopilotes" forshadow his death as well as the future self-destruction of his tormentors. When Camila realizes that her cowardly, status-quo supporting relatives have disowned her, she is enshrouded with a coldness like the feathers of a dead bird (206,145). Proclaiming figuratively the death knoll of all familial feeling in the President's world, Doña Chon –the "deeply religious" brothel owner who previously purchased the innocent young mother Fedina Rodas from the authorities– is described as a puffed-up cackling hen coming to the rescue of her chicks (230-31,162). After running to help one of her "girls" hit by a tram, Chon's motherly qualities are wordlessly put into question when she drags the injured woman over to a coal shed so the cook can finish her off by giving her several blows on the head with a spit.

Doña Chon's hypocritical religious devotion is mirrored in bird images appearing in Camila's delirious dreams when she is deathly ill. In "the great beyond of parakeets […] in God's cage" (254, 177), she envisions a mass being said for a cock, who is pecking at a host alternatively illuminated and extinguished (254, 177), as if acknowledging the takeover of the church by the President and extinction of the transcendental principle. The "little soldiers" surrounding the bottle that "God's cage" transforms itself into suggests the President's maintenance of the institution of the church for its "inebriating" control over the population.

Meanwhile, fleeing for his life in the countryside, General Canales encounters a thief who is an honest man--an aboriginal fugitive introduced by "a tickling of bird trills", "a harmonious concert of birds" (267, 185). After listening to the Indian's story about injustices suffered at the hands of the President, the Colonel journeys with him to the country house of three unmarried sisters who have more tales to tell about their ruination at the hands of government officials. As if mirroring the corruption of the city that has invaded the countryside, "the gratitude of planted earth, the gentleness of green fields and simple little flowers" (273, 189) ends abruptly with "the terror of partridges hunters (are) showering with shot" (273, 189). Nevertheless, hope regenerates itself in phoenix-like fashion, in the context of the natural envirnment. Having escaped from the authorities and alligator attacks in the darkness of the swamp, the colonel and his aboriginal friend say goodbye at dawn, as "birds convert mountains of dense forest into musical boxes" (279, 193). Trees and the wilderness provide shelter for the colonel who attempts to sing a tune of another kind: he organizes revolutionary forces to march against the President. In spite of bullets that "chirp like big birds" (357-58, 248), the new revolutionary army sings (like birds) as the men sharpen machetes bought from an ironmonger whose shop had been burnt down by the President (*cf.* 358, 248)

Back in the city, the widow of the lawyer Carvajal –the other man falsely accused of murdering Parrales– listens to a chattering parrot in her garden proclaiming "I cry but I don't forget" ("!No lloro pero me acuerdo!" 332, 230), as she opens up anonymous letters from well-wishers who describe the heroic attitude of her husband as he faced his executioners. Ironically, even though her husband had nothing to do with Parrales' death, the lawyer is hailed as a hero by underground movements who regarded Parrales as an enemy of the people (*cf.* 327-31, 227-29). Like the bird of paradise in el Pelele's dream, the executed lawyer Carvajal comes to symbolize "the lie in all things real and the truth in all fiction" (35, 24) –life beyond the President. Meanwhile, Cara de Ángel, now married to Camila and starting to have serious doubts about the President, asks himself why he couldn't have been a hummingbird ("burrión") instead of a man (343, 238).

Becoming aware of the President's displeasure with him for having married Camila for love, Cara de Ángel resolves to leave the country as soon as possible with his wife. Unfortunately, he is tricked into going on a diplomatic mission to New York and in transit, the President has the opportunity to imprison him in a solitary underground cell and send a double in his place.

During Cara de Ángel's and Camila's last night of love together, images of servants chasing and killing a hen, which continues to flap its wings even after it is dead, are intertwined with descriptions of the couple's love making: "El pollo dio contra el muro o el muro se le vino encima […] Le retorcieron el pescuezo […] Como si volara muerto sacudía las

alas[…] Camila cerró los ojos[…] El peso de su marido[…] El aleteo[…] La queda mancha[…]" (380-81). Cara de Ángel is the bird who will be pursued, trapped and eventually squashed by the authorities.

In this violent image intertwining flight, entrapment, and death resides also symbols of resurrection: the consummation of lovemaking, the conceiving of another human being, wings that continue to flap –the phoenix that arises from its ashes. In spite of her husband's slow horrific death as a prisoner in an underground cell, spiritually broken at last by a lie circulated about his wife, Camila takes his newborn son to the countryside and gives the boy his father's real name –Miguel– Archangel, messenger of God.

Just prior to being abducted from her father's house by Cara de Ángel, Camila had remembered her youthful sense of wonder and marvel at the seaside, contemplating the power of nature. She had felt the wind tugging at her hat resembling "a big round bird" (115, 79), as if symbolic of the protective, transcendent rhythms of nature. Retreating to the countryside after the disappearance of her husband, she sees nature's miracle of regeneration all around her –a "day dawning after her long night of grief" ("aclaró un día en la noche de su pena", 399), as she listens to the trills of mockingbirds ("cenzontles", 276). Thus, like the bird who flapped its wings even after it was dead, Miguel lives on in little Miguel, and with him the hope and assertion that nature's eternal cycles will prevail over human corruption.

## 2. Un día en la vida

Like Asturias, Manlio Argueta in *Un día en la vida* has sown his novel of social protest with bird imagery, but in a more positive note. While Argueta's bird imagery also is connected frequently to death and persecution, it simultaneously enshrines the spirit of revolution. Phoenix-like in its function, it speaks to the necessity of fighting back, maintaining hope and faith in social justice and community. Transcendental in nature, it infers that the darkness of death and oppression is negated by light, hope, communication, love.

The "clarinero", introduced in the second paragraph of the novel, is a "loud, disturbing alarmclock" (19, 3) whose whistles symbolically pierce the darkness (*cf.* 3) and announce the dawn– "a mass of flying birds" (20, 4). While the clarinero "stands out because of its shrieking blackness" (20,4), and "has acquired the habits of the dead because it spends so much time near cemeteries" (20, 4), it paradoxically also is the herald of the coming light. Whereas the sky is "like the blood of a dead bird" (20, 4), so that violent hue also introduces the dawn's first light– "the colour of a firebrand lit in the darkness" (20, 4), evoking the blood of revolutionary heroes that will give rise to social change. The clarinero's real function as a symbol for El Salvador's revolutionary movement becomes apparent when Lupe's husband José knocks on her door at the first crack of dawn after sleeping all night in the mountains to escape persecution from the right-wing authorities (*cf.* 49). José (Chepe) is "the soul of the co-operative" (109) –one of the first who taught others the meaning of injustice, rights, solidarity, community, conscience.

The behaviour of chickens, also mentioned in the first pages of the novel, parallels the life of human peasants: jumping down from their perches to eat bits of corn, little stones and broken eggshell, they resemble workers getting ready to go to the plantations of landowners (*cf.* 24, 9) to earn their tortillas. Chickens, in images associated with the Catholic church, also signify the birth of social awareness in the people. Whereas the old-style priests were meaner than rattlesnakes ("chinchintoras', 34, 24) and assumed it was their right to take food from peasants who didn't have enough to share with them, the young priests don't go around "asking for little hens" (35, 25). Instead they encourage people to employ better methods of husbandry to ensure a greater food supply: "huevo puesto, huevo empollado" (40, 32). These new priests, exponents of liberation theology, who preach that "to get to heaven, we first have to fight for the construction of a paradise on earth" (33, 23) also teach the meaning of "rights", human dignity and increased financial independence, through the formation of co-operatives (*cf.* 40, 25). While the former priests taught resignation in the face of death, that dead children were in heaven "forever chubby and rosy-cheeked" (39, 31), the young priests preach "the right to medicines, to food, to schooling" (39,31). The symbolic significance of chickens as a symbol of the peasants' new awareness of their "rights" is consolidated when José is confused with one. When Lupe hears barking at night, she thinks the dog is playing with the chickens. Instead, José walks in unexpectedly (*cf.* 51, 49)

The symbolic link between birds and humans initiated by José is emphasized through María Pía, Lupe's daughter. Her "bird-like" name is ridiculed by the National Guard one night, just prior to them breaking down her door, beating her up, and destroying her home: "Abrí Pía, abrí pollita, pío, pío, pío" (69,72). Her husband having been taken away by the authorities and her house vandalized, she decides to sleep in the hills with her children, but never gives up hope that Helio will return. Her real hope is in the next generation –her daughter Adolfina: granddaughter of José, daughter of Helio, and the inheritor of their awareness of social injustice.

In the chapter bearing her name, Adolfina reflects on the significance of the "guis" (kiskadee) as she begins her long journey to her grandmother's house after participating in political demonstrations. Remarking on the whirlwinds of choking dust around Chaletenango that appear to negate any hope of transcendence ("Pensar que de este polvo somos, que a este polvo iremos'' 72, 76), she is elevated ''miraculously'' from her desolate thoughts by the appearance of a bird– ''un guis'' (73, 77). While her grandmother has told her that the "guis" announces death (*cf.* 73, 77), she remembers her father telling her that the bird only appears around Easter – the season of Christ's resurrection on earth (73, 77 Jesus Christ can be interpreted as the soul of social revolution, having provided bread and fish for his followers as well as a view to a new social, moral order. Adolfina observes that the "guis" is a valiant bird ("el único pájaro valiente" (74, 78). that fights even hawks ("gavilones"); getting on top of them, riding them and staying on no matter how many times the hawk flips over and tries to shake them off (74, 78). The "guis's" indomitable spirit is a model for men of conscience like José, fighting to bring about social change: "Son bien bonitas las peleas de guis con el gavilán, porque este se le corre y aquel lo va siguiendo", 74, 78). Getting off a bus that has been stopped by the authorities, she realizes that the "guis" will get to her grandmother's before her –a messenger (75, 79) working within a natural network of communication linking her society (humans and creatures of nature) together.

Perhaps the guis also carries messages from another dimension. As Adolfina approaches the house, Lupe communicates with her son Justino through channels that transcend the physical perimeters of death. Remembering him, she realizes that the authorities may have hacked his body to pieces but his spirit, invincible, is still with her ("hola que tal 'silencioso y tu cuerpo invisible. No te miramos pero te presentimos, Justino. Eso basta", 117, 139). While no bird imagery is directly related to Justino, his spirit is a phoenix-like symbol of the revolutionary struggle itself – transcending death as its heroes live on in the memories of their community and inspire the living. During the occupation of the Cathedral, to protest Justino's brutal murder, Adolfina incarnates the symbol of the phoenix in physical terms, as she assumes her father Helio's revolutionary convictions and social/ familial commitment: "Mi papá se llama Helio Hernandez. Era el sostén de la familia. Ahora soy yo" (126, 152).

Adolfina's arrival at her Grandmother's house is heralded by another bird –the "tortolita" or "sad dove" ("paloma triste", 132-33, 161) whose cry Lupe likens to the sobbing of a child (*cf.* 161). While the authorities escort the two women to view the body of José beaten almost beyond recognition, Lupe sees "the afternoon lights suddenly turn on" (140, 171) as tortolitas "call to each other over great distances without needing little radios" (140,171). The birds' evocation of enlightenment and solidarity provokes Lupe to remember José's definition of "conscience": "[…] to sacrifice oneself for the exploited" (141, 172).

Just as Cirlot has suggested that the souls of evildoers in the Muslim tradition are incarnated in birds of prey (*cf.* 38), so a series of Argueta's bird images depict hawks descending on chicks (evocative of the authorities stealing away children like Justino): "Flecha veloz, oídos de tísico, gavilán pollero. Como el viento cae sobre los palos de mangos maduros. Así cae el gavilán sobre los pollitos. La gallina pelea con el gavilán […] y corre hacía los demás, una vez que ha perdido a uno de sus hijitos" (142, 174; see also 145, 179). Memories of Justino's death summon up the circumstances of Helio's disappearance and Lupe's realization that, by causing a person to "disappear", the authorities kill two birds with one stone –yet another image emphasizing the symbolic link of birds to human beings struggling for liberation: "Con el desaparecido matan de un tiro dos pájaros: todos los vivos que se mueven alrededor del desaparecido están encadenados a la angustia. Y la angustia es una muerte lenta" (145, 178). Later, Lupe and Adolfina watch the authorities drag away the tortured, lifeless body of José –the latest chicken stolen by the hawks who only carry off the very best of the brood: "Y se van, como los gavilanes se llevan entre las patas a los hijitos de las gallinas. Entre las patas nos arrastran, seguros de sí mismos" (159, 199).

Argueta's previous dual characterization of bird figures both evil (hawks) and good (clarineros, hens, guises, tortolitas) finds reflection in two other bird species that had negative and positive influences on Adolfina at the age of two: parakeets and "chachalacas''. In María Pía's opinion, the presence of a "periquito" in the household was responsible for Adolfina's inability to talk. As a remedy, the ''curandero''prescribed chachalaca soup. We might speculate that the parakeet, with a limited ability to imitate utterances heard around it, represents unthinking people who accept without question what is dictated to them and compound their error by repeating it to others. The chachalacas, sacrificed in the interests of little Adolfina's health being restored, may represent members of the community with "conscience" –those willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. Argueta describes the chachalacas in terms evoking

the undaunted attitude of El Salvador's revolutionary fighters: "Y quien las calla[…] Y por más piedras que se les tire, siguen con su chachalaquería" (161, 202).

The story of the intrepid "chachalacas" is followed by a chapter devoted entirely to Lupe's remembrances of José. No bird images appear in this chapter because José himself is the bird of paradise resting on the tree of life, or the phoenix arising from its own ashes. Just after the authorities hauled away José's body battered beyond recognition, Lupe finds solace in the lingering odour of her husband: "Queda un olor a Chepe, el mismo olor que trae todos los días del trabajo, olor limpio y agradable a sudor, a hombre de verdad. Es como el perfume de nuestra vida" (160, 199). She continues to talk about him in the present tense; even while she envisions him asleep forever on the trunk of a pine tree (167, 211), with "zopilotes" circling in the air, waiting to carry him off in their beaks (167, 211). Lupe does not cry because José is still her hope, his words still reach her: "Y yo no voy a llorar porque él será mi esperanza, sus palabras me están llegando ya. Dios es la conciencia. Y la conciencia somos nosotros, los olvidados ahora, los pobres" (167, 211).

Through the network of bird imagery that Argueta has constructed in his text, the macabre physical reality of José's body dumped in the mountains to be eaten by animals is vanquished by the transcendent symbolic significance afforded to trees and birds. Just as Salvadorian priests of liberation theology fought for their parishioner's earthly needs and rights as an integral part of their spiritual liberation, so José's transcendence takes place in earthly terms within the memory of his own community. Reclining on a pine tree, José's body is rooted to his own good earth while it reaches to the sky. Those vultures, carrying his body away piece by piece, are the physical reflection of his revolutionary spirit nourishing every community member whom he helped or influenced. His own granddaughter Adolfina is his spokesperson –the phoenix arising from the ashes of his death– who remembers what her father told her about the origin of the injustice, what her grandfather said about conscience (169, 214).

### Conclusion

The image of José reclining on a pine tree at the end of Manlio Argueta's *Un día en la vida* recalls to mind the dream of el Pelele at the beginning of Miguel Angel Asturias's *El señor presidente*: el Pelele rests with his mother in the shadow of a pine tree beside a river, listening to the song of a bird that was also a golden bell (Asturias, 35, 24). The bird's song that is a bell is like Asturias's protest novel itself, heralding in a fifty year long era when some Central American writers, also sick to their souls, disseminated a consciousness of injustice, oppression and human rights. Manlio Argueta's novel of 1980 –linked metaphorically to Asturias's novel published in 1946– represents the phoenix-like resurrection of Central American protest literature that Asturias's novel exemplified. ergo

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