"Mr. Allan Burns, I am here to tell you an example, the example of the Hunchbacks." That's what Paulino Yamá, traditionalist and storyteller, said to Allan Burns, anthropologist and linguist, in the process of beginning a story that found its way into this book. The event itself is remarkable enough—that the person who asked for the story, Mr. Allan Burns, should become part of the text of that story. But what is more remarkable still is that Mr. Allan Burns, instead of acting, in these pages, as if he had been the invisible and mute observer of Maya who were simply going about their usual business, has chosen to drop the onlooker's mask and let us see plainly that these Maya took full account of his presence among them. In so doing, he has placed himself in the service of the Mayan notion that a person who asks for a verbal performance should participate in the event, rather than in the service of the traditional scholarly notion that verbal art is an object that should be collected without creating any disturbance.

There may be no people anywhere more reluctant than the Maya—in Yucatán and in general—to suspend or abridge the fundamentally dialogical nature of speech in favor of the demands of one single voice pronouncing the Word into a passive ear. In this they could scarcely be more different from missionaries—and, yes, from anthropologists too, who tend to produce certain books in which only anthropologists speak and other, quite separate books in which only natives speak. For the Yucatec Maya, even an asymmetrical genre such as narrative formally requires performance not only by "the person who knows the stories" but by "the person who knows how to answer," the latter being much more than a mere member of an audience. And (as we learn here for the first time), when the scene shifts to the gathering of an entire community for readings from a Chilam Balam book (the Mayan equivalent of Scripture), dialogue is preserved by having two readers, speaking antiphonally. At the opposite extreme, as when Alonzo Gonzales Mó sits down alone to write in a notebook for Allan Burns (see the "Definitions" in chapter 7), dialogue is kept alive through the use of the first and second persons, and questions are addressed to the reader.

Burns has brought the Mayan spirit of dialogue even to his task as a translator. Not only does he face some of his English pages with Mayan ones, but he eases our way into the Mayan language by introducing us to some of its general features early on, and he even gives us a glimpse of how Mayan speakers chose to teach him that language when he was in the field. He is also true to the spirit of dialogue when he lets us in on "experimental" discourses that go beyond Mayan generic boundaries, taking forms that developed specifically within the intersubjective, intercultural world created by and during field work. One of these experiments, "The Story of the Milpa," is a remarkably rich tapestry of Mayan self-description, the kind of text Paul Radin would have greatly admired, complete with its own internal storytelling interlude in a day in the life of a milpero, a story within a story.

In dealing with content, as with form, Burns does not allow himself to be limited by the standards of the antiquarian, who is always overanxious to learn what the Maya may have preserved from that mythic age before Europeans first arrived. In these pages we will find more from that age than we might have expected, especially when the Feathered Serpent and the Owners of Rain make their appearances, but we are also treated to the likes of Fidel Castro and Richard Nixon. Here, too, is Sylvanus G. Morley, who, if he were still with us, would finally learn just what the Maya were saying to him on a memorable public occasion down in Yucatán. At the very same time, it is abundantly clear that the Mayan "epoch of miracles" never really ends. We learn that, in Quintana Roo, the Caste War is still on, and Mexico "is so far away"! At home with the Maya, even a dark story about secrets can end with the narrator's remark that he recently walked by the very house where the survivors of that story still live.

This book not only deals with events but itself becomes an event in the process, an event for all those who study the Maya and for all those—be they linguists, anthropologists, or folklorists—who treat the verbal arts as performing arts. Here are not only texts and translations, words and sentences, but sounds and intervening silences, shouts and whispers, passages in which performers sneak up on things and others in which they take things by storm. And we can clearly see that there is much more to Mayan phrasing than the ceaseless milling of the couplets we have heard so much about, couplets though there may be.

There is no other book for all of Mesoamerica that so brings the verbal arts to life, that lets them breathe, the way this one does. We should all be thankful to Alonzo Gonzales Mó, Paulino Yamá, Pascual May, and Santiago Chan for sharing their ancient conversations, their counsels and secrets, their riddles and jokes with Allan Burns. And to Allan Burns, for sharing these with us, thanks again.