

Anaya, Rudolfo - Essays on Anaya's work

CECIL ROBINSON

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OF CULTURES IN
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Cecil Robinson

No Short Journeys

*The Interplay of Cultures in the History
and Literature of the Borderlands*

With a Foreword by Robert S. Cauthorn and
an Introduction by Reed Way Dasenbrock

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A Creative Burst from New Mexico:
The Novels and Stories of Rudolfo Anaya

It seems fitting that New Mexico, the state which has most preserved its Hispanic and indigenous past, should have produced a novelist who is steeped in the traditions and folklore of that past. This writer, Rudolfo Anaya, is not only heir to these traditions; he also has the personal ingenuity to invent some "traditions" of his own, assuming the license of the writer of fiction. Although Anaya grew up in New Mexico with its large Hispanic population, he has, nevertheless, experienced some prejudice against his race. It was the Chicano movement of the 1960s, which he encountered at just the right time in his development, that gave him an affirmation of his self-worth. He has written exultantly that "a feeling of renewed pride flowed in the people. Everywhere I went, the message was the same: It is good to be a Chicano!"

The novel which first brought Anaya to the attention of a large reading public was *Bless Me, Ultima*, a work of fiction which has both a freshness and an eerie quality that mark it as a singular contribution to Chicano literature. Published in 1972, *Bless Me, Ultima* is on one level an intimate account of life in a Mexican-American family in a small town in New Mexico. But on a deeper level, as in the case of the works of Hawthorne and Faulkner, Anaya's novel makes use of folk culture and folklore to symbolize universal themes, ultimately the clash of good and evil.

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Place is used both realistically and symbolically in this novel, and certain places, with their special connotations, are played off against each other. In the town of Guadalupe there are the school, the church, and Rosie's whorehouse. In the nearby town of El Puerto there is Tenorio's saloon. These places serve as points of reference in the novel as well as contributing strongly to the atmosphere of the book.

The narrator is a young boy, Tony Márez, who is seven years old at the start of the novel and ten at the close. But the point of view is that of an adult mind recollecting the years of boyhood. At the beginning of the novel, Tony's parents bring an elderly woman, a *curandera*, to live with the family. A *curandera* is a traditional healer and dispenser of herbs. Such women were often feared as *brujas* (witches), and many people gave Ultima a wide berth. Tony's family owes Ultima a debt for cures and for midwifery. In fact, she helped bring Tony into the world. Tony and Ultima soon develop a strong affection for each other, and Tony becomes a kind of apprentice to the old woman, learning from her the secrets of nature and also much general wisdom.

The point is made that Ultima's lore and learning come, on the one hand, from the Spanish/Moorish past and, on the other, from the Indian heritage. For example, she apologizes to plants before picking them and teaches Tony to do likewise.

For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it from its home in the earth. "You that grow well here in the arroyo by the dampness of the river, we lift you to make good medicine," she intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her. Then I would carefully dig out the plant, taking care not to let the steel of the shovel touch the tender roots.¹

The novel has its villain in the evil Tenorio Tramentina, who brings upon himself and his three daughters the curse of the *curandera* Ultima. The firm writing and sense of discrimination in this novel preserve it from lapsing into melodrama.

In the collection of short stories *The Silence of the Llano*, Anaya demonstrates, as he had already done in *Bless Me, Ultima*, that he is willing to move away from safe and proven ground. His imagination is endowed with an exploratory energy, and he is willing to take risks. Increasingly in the course of its development, Anaya's writing has represented an important fusion, one which is also to be found in other examples of Chicano writing. Early works by Mexican-American writers seemed to be clearly in the tradition of American literary realism. The influence of such

writers as Steinbeck and Hemingway was apparent. But with the appearance of . . . *and the Earth Did Not Part* by Tomás Rivera and *The Road To Tamazunchale* by Ron Arias, Chicano literature began to take new directions. There was a movement inward, displaying the subjective landscape. In conjunction with this, elements of fantasy came into play. Anaya has taken Chicano literature further in this direction. What appears to be in process is a vitalizing fusion of American literary realism with the so-called magical realism to be found in the works of such current Latin American writers as Juan Rulfo (Mexico), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), and the Argentine writers Julio Cortázar and Manuel Puig.

This subjectivism and the use of magical elements are both strongly evident in *Bless Me, Ultima*. That such literary effects are able to blend so successfully within a generally realistic treatment is due in large measure to the nature of the subject matter. Regional writing within a rural setting almost invariably entails the use of folkloric materials. As in the black magic rituals of Nigger Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, the lore and practices of the *curandera* Ultima are inherent in a regional folk tradition. Magical elements, therefore, are not superimposed but are of a piece with the regional elements being treated. To be sure, Anaya, having established his framework within regional expectations, is able to exercise the creative imagination by bringing in elements that apparently are quite of his own making. Such would seem to be the case with Ultima's owl, containing the essence of her soul, and with the magical golden carp.

The subjective cast of the novel is assured by having a first-person narrator. That the narrator is a young boy recounting his rites of passage puts *Ultima* squarely in the tradition of the American initiation novel and in direct line of descent from Mark Twain's masterpiece. But here again Rudolfo Anaya is able to work in something very much his own, departing from the straightforward realism of Huck Finn's narration. The dream sequences in which Antonio's friends who have died appear to him in nightmares are projections not to be expected in works of literary realism, and indeed they invite speculations quite out of the ordinary. For example, when these friends are departing from the nightmare, they cry out to him longingly: "We live when you dream, Tony, we live only in your dreams." But such apparitional effects are occasional and do not disturb the balance of the novel.

In Anaya's next novel, *Heart of Aztlán*, realistic and magical elements are again fused—but this time in a more difficult enterprise. The inevitability is no longer there. The realistic elements are familiar ones in

Chicano writing. A rural Hispanic family moves into the city and tries to cope with problems of adjustment. Once settled in Albuquerque, the younger members of the Chávez family become increasingly citified and Americanized, and the father, Clemente, experiences the steady erosion of his traditional patriarchal authority. The men of the family work at a plant where labor troubles develop as a result of exploitation by the bosses and by the tamed leader of the company union. In these manifestations *Heart of Aztlán* is clearly in the tradition of the proletarian novel and of the Chicano novel of social protest. However, Anaya introduces into this body of realistic writing a counterthrust of quite a different sort. There is an effort to fuse magical realism with proletarian realism. These are not ready allies, and the attempt to merge them involves a straining of effort which is sometimes apparent.

The attempt, however, is not lacking in ingenuity. A connecting figure in the novel is Crispín, the blind singer who plays a blue guitar. The name Crispín and the introduction of a blue guitar inevitably lead to associations with the poet Wallace Stevens. One remembers that for Stevens "things as they are / are changed upon the blue guitar." Thus the theme of the transforming power of the imagination is introduced. Crispín is a repository of traditions going back to the ancient Aztlán, but with his wisdom and the power of his songs he is also a transformer in the Wallace Stevens sense.

At one point, Crispín and Clemente Chávez, a somewhat charismatic leader of the strikers, go to an ancient witch woman, a darkened and more sinister image of the rural *curandera*. This woman is the custodian of the magic black rock. Through contact with the electric current of this rock, Clemente gains access to "the heart of Aztlán." Thus illuminated, he leads the people as a counterforce to another leader, Lalo, who preaches standard forceful opposition to the established powers. Clemente's powers are to be those of love and of the heart of Aztlán, the generic elan of *la raza*. The mythmaking here seems somewhat contrived. Although Clemente is pictured as being charged with a powerful current of inspiration, the alternatives he offers are not really made clear. As a matter of fact, in Anaya's next novel, *Tortuga*, which is in a certain sense a sequel to *Heart of Aztlán*, we discover from a letter written by Clemente's wife to their long-hospitalized son that Crispín has died and that the labor situation is largely unsettled. Thus the novel itself remains to a certain extent unresolved.

Anaya's third novel, *Tortuga*, is clearly a more impressive effort. Here elements of myth, legend, and fantasy are blended with the story of a

young man's struggle for physical recovery and spiritual redemption. A paralyzed young man is brought to a hospital for the severely crippled which is located in an isolated region of the desert areas of New Mexico. The reader might suspect that this nineteen-year-old is the Benjie of *Heart of Aztlán*, who is paralyzed from a fall from a tower. However, this identity is not established until close to the end of the novel. Thus *Tortuga* stands on its own and is not, in any real sense, a continuation of the earlier novel. As in *Ultima*, the point of view is that of a first-person narrator. The young man's paralysis is so severe that his entire body is in a cast, from which comes his nickname Tortuga (turtle). This binding cast functions both literally and symbolically. When he arrives at the hospital, Tortuga's ailments are not restricted to the physical. He is a thoroughly alienated young man. Thus he faces two powerful challenges. One is to overcome his paralysis through the force of will and painful physical therapy. The other is to achieve a philosophical foothold, a *raison d'être*. This he must do in the face of the dreadful spectacle of rows of "vegetable" cases in iron lungs and even a children's ward of infants in a state of living death. These specimens are at least spiritually presided over by the mortally ill boy-prophet-savant Solomón, who challenges Tortuga to visit these wards—something the other patients dare not do—and face up to the philosophical implications of what he witnesses.

Tortuga is almost destroyed spiritually by this experience, and his physical progress is arrested. He reaches inward for philosophical support. Existentialism of the European model will not suffice. Neither Prometheus nor Sisyphus—seeming to Tortuga to be essentially subservient—will do as a model of stoicism.

Tortuga's redemption comes from several sources. The deep friendships he forms with other young patients in the hospital reveal to him the possibilities of human companionship. With Solomón he has a special kind of relationship. In actual fact, he sees Solomón infrequently and on those occasions has little to say to him, but in his dreams Tortuga frequently encounters Solomón, who instructs him by story, legend, myth, and symbol. These are often connected with other dream manifestations, such as a recurring First Communion scene. The white-clad girls with clasped hands to their lips in prayer seem the very incarnation of purity. However, this aura is later cast into doubt by scenes of the girls disrobing. Frequently among the girls is Cynthia, a young patient at the hospital who is crippled and hunchbacked. Another person who appears to Tortuga in his dreams as both vision and instructor is Ismelda, the beauti-

ful nurse's aide who loves Tortuga. That Tortuga is able to return this love marks an important step in his recovery.

Another significant element in Tortuga's cure is the mountain that he can see from his hospital window, which is also called Tortuga. When he was being driven across the desert on the way to the hospital, Tortuga was told by the old driver, Filomón, that the mountain had magical properties. The mountain in fact looks like a turtle, and Filomón tells the legend that at one time, when waters covered the desert floor, Tortuga was free and swam through the waters. Furthermore, legend has it that the waters will return, and Tortuga will regain his freedom.

From his window in the hospital, the boy Tortuga watches the mountain in its various moods. Sometimes it shines out incandescently, and Tortuga feels that he is receiving its special powers. The mountain appears frequently in his dreams, and toward the end of the novel, when he himself is ready to have his cast removed, he has a powerful dream in which Tortuga tears himself loose and swims off in the great floodwaters.

The central role that Tortuga mountain plays in the novel points to an underlying theme in the novel, that of the power of place. Just as in the first novel the *curandera* Ultima acted the role of earth goddess in instructing the young Antonio to feel and to respond to the power of the river and of other objects in nature, so do Tortuga's dream instructors bring him into a fraught correspondence with the mountain.

Perhaps here we are getting to the real heart of Aztlán. Has not Anaya drawn upon the Indian side of Chicano culture, that which insists upon the land as sacred and as a counter to the man-made and artificial aspects of the institutional religion stemming from Europe (one remembers the flawed Communion dream) and perhaps of formal philosophies? The effectiveness of dreams as a medium of instruction is also a concept that is central to the thought of various Indian groups. In one of the final scenes in the novel *Tortuga*, the cured narrator is preparing to leave the hospital when he receives a package. It contains Crispín's blue guitar, which has been willed to him. Thus we have the added theme, implicit in the others, of the transforming power of the imagination when exercised in the arts.

In his collection of short stories, *The Silence of the Llano*, Rudolfo Anaya brings into play themes and techniques that he has used in his novels, while at the same time exploring others. The title of the collection itself, which is also applied to the first of the stories, is an indication of Anaya's continuing concern with the power of place. Beginning with *Ultima*, the llano, the plain, has stood for freedom and independence, but it has also,

in its silence, represented solitude—as in the case of the lonely, wife-bereft man of the first tale.

As mentioned above, three of the stories in this collection were taken from the novels, but in their new context they supply a different emphasis. "Solomón's Tale," from *Tortuga*, is a narrative told by Solomón about a critical experience in his life. Solomón is seeking membership in a boys' gang. By way of initiation he is told that he must kill a great turtle which the boys discover on the banks of a river. Solomón is horrified, but nevertheless he cuts off the turtle's head with his hunting knife. The turtle is so powerful that it plunges toward the water, even though headless. Solomón cannot hold it back, and as it disappears into the river, it stains the water a deep red. The boys run off in terror, fearing a curse. The next morning Solomón wakes up paralyzed. As part of the novel *Tortuga*, this story obviously ties in to the other uses of turtle imagery. But even removed from this context it can generate an awesome sense of the penalties meted out to those who disturb the order of nature. The animistic gods of the river are not to be violated.

From *Heart of Aztlán* comes the story "El Velorio" (the wake). Rufus defies the mortician, Montoya, and the priest, Fr. Cayo, who cite New Mexico state law in their insistence that the drowned body of Rufus's adult son Henry be sent to the mortuary for proper examination. The crippled Rufus carries the huge body of his son back to the family home, where a traditional wake is celebrated, with old Lázaro singing the traditional *alabados*. There is food and drink, and the neighbors stay up until dawn. In this story the power of tradition is cited against the legalisms of petty bureaucracy.

"The Christmas Play" is from *Bless Me, Ultima*. Because of an unusually heavy snowstorm, only the boys show up for school one morning close to Christmas. The teacher, Miss Violet, is nevertheless determined to put on the Christmas play, even though boys will now have to play the part of the Virgin, angels, etc. The boys are more than recalcitrant, and the whole scene is uproariously funny. One is reminded that Anaya, despite his preoccupation with central and serious human issues, is far from being without a sense of humor, as several of the other stories in *The Silence of the Llano* attest. "The Christmas Story" works very well on its own. However, in *Bless Me, Ultima*, it has an important contextual function. It provides a needed respite as events move toward a sinister and violent climax.

Like the stories in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anaya's tales go beyond literal realism but maintain a psychological authenticity.

Some of his characters are indeed "grotesques" in Anderson's sense of the word. One of the best of the stories in *Silence*, though clearly in the Chicano mode, is nevertheless reminiscent of some of the stories in *Winesburg*. The difference in time of publication, however, allows "The Apple Orchard" to be a more "liberated" tale. The narrator, a teenage boy, is challenged by his friends to put part of a mirror on the top of his shoe so that he can look up inside the dresses of the girls. He tries this technique with varying degrees of success. Finally, and very surreptitiously, he tries it on his beautiful teacher, Miss Brighton. But he is caught. Miss Brighton's first reaction is one of shock. But then, since the two of them are alone in the classroom, she undresses completely so as to dispel the mystery. After a thorough look, the boy rushes out of the building and runs in exaltation through an orchard whose burgeoning beauty he associates with the teacher's body. Of course, a Sherwood Anderson teacher—and quite evidently a Rudolfo Anaya teacher—is more likely to act that way than the average female member of the N.E.A. The psychological point, however, is a valid one, and the story—particularly at the end—has a good deal of lyrical strength.

One of the most significant extensions in thematic concern that occur in *The Silence of the Llano* is the treatment of Mexico proper. The Chicano artist of the Southwest has reached out for the mother culture, and in doing so has drawn upon fantasy, legend, and myth. "B. Traven is Alive and Well in Cuernavaca" is a meandering story within a story. The Chicano writer is being entertained by a wealthy Mexican in the town of Cuernavaca. Among the guests are a number of writers and artists. They are all pleasant enough, but the narrator senses a degree of superficiality among them. He becomes restive and wanders out into the night, where he confronts the "Mexico which never sleeps." This is the Mexico of the great revolution, a Mexico which has been betrayed in many ways—particularly by the kind of people now carousing in the house that he has just left. But the narrator feels the real Mexico, out there in the night and stirring.

The next day he again leaves the ongoing party and gets into a conversation with the gardener Justino, very much a man of the land. Justino tells him the story of the "pozo de Mendoza" (Mendoza's well), a tale of buried treasure. The loot was stolen by the hacienda owner, Don Francisco, the *patrón*, who had murdered to get it. It is now hidden in the "pozo de Mendoza," but it is said that Don Francisco can never get hold of it because each time he reaches for it, it disappears. Justino vows that someday he will find it, and when he does, it will yield itself up to him.

The narrator returns to the house but again finds himself wandering away from the guests. He enters an obscure alcove, and there he discovers a dignified old man. By intuition the narrator knows that this is the mysterious and long-dead writer B. Traven, who knew so well the oppressions of Mexico's poor and who was well attuned to the "Mexico which never sleeps." B. Traven warns the narrator against pseudo writers. With this ending, Rudolfo Anaya allows the story to speak for itself.

But even deeper than the revolutionary Mexico which stirs in the night and "never sleeps" is the aboriginal Mexico of pre-Columbian times. This Mexico, too, keeps its vigil and, particularly in the remoter areas of the south, practices its ancient rituals. In "The Village Which the Gods Painted Yellow," Anaya makes an imaginative construct of a secret and surviving Maya community somewhere south of Uxmal. Anaya avails himself of the same type of poetic license which D. H. Lawrence used in *The Plumed Serpent*, and indeed the story has a distinctly Lawrencian aura in its juxtaposition of quotidian life in a Mexican resort town with the ancient, secret, and sinister practices of a hidden Mayan town where the village and all about it are painted yellow. The protagonist Rosario is enjoying himself, lounging around a resort near Uxmal, drinking and "making it" with blond European and American girls. But behind this seeming casualness is the strong urge which brought Rosario to Uxmal in the first place. From far north he had heard rumors of "the village which the gods painted yellow," and he was determined to find it.

This theme in Anaya's writing is one which appears in various forms in Chicano literature. The Chicano writer is often a dissident in terms of middle-class Mexican-American society. This segment, as it enters the American mainstream, tends to emphasize the European or Spanish component of its heritage and to suppress the Indian. In reaction, the Chicano writer, in search of the deepest elements of being, has felt the urge to make an at least imaginative contact with pre-Columbian Mexico. One might take the poetry of Alurista as a case in point. Anaya's story "The Village Which the Gods Painted Yellow" does not attempt to "launder" the Mayan past. In fact, as in Lawrence's novel, the more grimly the Indian past is seen as different from the European, the more compelling its attraction.

In Anaya's story, Rosario is conducted by Gonzalo, one of the few Mayan guides with special knowledge, to the hidden village, where an ancient Mayan ceremony is to be performed. Gonzalo, a dwarf, is expected, in accordance with legend, to raise a pyramid to the gods in one night. When he fails to do so, he is grabbed by the priests and spread over

the sacrificial stone. His heart is cut out in the ancient manner. At this point, the priests turn on Rosario and cut his Achilles tendons. Rosario understands that he is now the dwarf and the new magician, and that he must return at the next winter solstice to try to raise a pyramid in one night.

This last tale of Anaya's is certainly his farthest from literary realism. But it is certain that in extending his range, not only in terms of literary technique but also geographically, from the American Southwest into Mexico, he has become an American writer in the hemispheric sense and has provided us with an example of a new and important role which Chicano literature is assuming, that of literary bridge between the two main cultures of the New World.

In his latest works, Anaya has continued in this vein. *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984) deals with the folkloric figure of the crying woman, who is said to haunt river bottoms and other desolate places. This work marks a foray into Mexican folklore that has extended into the American Southwest. In *Lord of the Dawn, the Legend of Quetzalcoatl* (1987), Anaya deals with a figure whose importance in pre-Columbian Mexico and Central America was immense. It has been said that Quetzalcoatl, the famous plumed serpent, was a deity whose influence in pre-Columbian Mexico was comparable with that of Christ in the Mexico of the Christian era. In 1985 Anaya published an epic poem of forty-eight pages, *The Adventures of Juan Chicaspatas*. His versatility in the various literary genres is further exemplified by the publication of a travel journal, *A Chicano in China* (1986), and by a number of literary essays. In 1987 he edited *Voces, an Anthology of Nuevo Mexicano Writers*. In the field of drama, Anaya has produced a number of one-act plays for television and for the stage. Still in full vigor, he can be expected to maintain his creative flow with characteristic verve and inventiveness.