

Anaya, Rudolfo *essay on Anaya's work*

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The Rite of Passage as a Figure for
Emergent Literature
in

Rudolfo A. ANAYA's

THE PLACE OF THE SWALLOWS

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"A WORD HAS POWER IN AND OF ITSELF"

N. Scott Momaday, The Way to Rainy Mountain

Rudolfo Anaya's short story "The Place of the Swallows",¹ about a group of young adolescent boys' hunting adventure in a forest, tackles the question of growing up in terms of the passage rite, while raising the fundamental literary issue of "how to tell a story".

The "tribe" headed by its "leader" must accomplish its daily journey into the "jungle" and hunt "wild" animals. At the end of the day one of the members must tell the story of the day's adventure to the other members assembled around a fire, enacting an elaborately codified ritual.

Is there a recipe for telling a good story? For this tribe the ingredients seem to be a full measure of "thick undergrowth", an equal measure of "dense, green darkness" with unseen animals who "utter fearful cries" and a river along which a track must be beaten. Some external elements are necessary to correctly mix these ingredients: the fall of night, a campfire with its "dancing light and shadows", the nearby presence of creatures stalking the camp, the lighting and passing round of a cigarette like a symbol of communion. But this is not enough. There are

¹ Rudolfo A. Anaya, The Silence of the Llano, (Berkeley, California: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1982)

instructions to be carefully followed: a religious silence must precede the story during which the story-teller is chosen,

and the silence can be broken only by the words which begin the story. The story-teller must begin; he can leave nothing out; he must tell the story of the tribe's wanderings, and he must tell the truth.

According to whose taste is the story to be flavored? According to the leader's? "I look for a clue on his face. What does he feel about the day's adventure, what does he want the tribe to hear, what did he learn at the Place of the Swallows?" In order to have the leader's approval, is flattery a necessary seasoning? "With the urging of our leader, we crossed that dangerous place", "our brave leader", "the instinct of our leader was great", "we marvelled at his wisdom", "we were thankful that our leader could read the signs". What qualifies the leader? In fact, the story-teller does not even remember how the leader became the leader except that "he must have performed an extraordinary feat to allow him to the head of our small, wandering tribe".

Although the story-teller here is apparently aware of all the above requirements he seems to have enormous difficulty in getting his story going. It is as if the confirmation of his identity as a tribe-member were at stake, depending on how he would tell his story. He seeks escape, "as my lungs draw breath to begin the story I think of home...", regressing into the completeness and security of childhood in his fear to face the

new stage of consciousness that the telling of the story may create.

He stutters and begins, but he begins the wrong story. Is it really the wrong story or a slip of the tongue? We do not need to know that the story of the killing of the giant river turtle is Salomón's in Anaya's novel Tortuga.² But if we do, it allows us to have piercing insight as regards the nature of the act performed and the consciousness it gave rise to. This allows us to understand that it is, in fact, the right story. But the story-teller here is not yet ready at this stage of the ritual to admit this flash of recognition and represses it. Instead he begins constructing a self-boosting narrative of the tribe's hunt that day: "There are no stories that tell of anyone ever crossing the great swamp ... but today, with the urging of our leader, we crossed that dangerous place..." Letting himself be carried away by the atmosphere of general approval that his fantasized version of the day's story has created, his descriptions "grow bolder". Feeling he is gaining favor with the leader through his narrative, he begins to dream of a more privileged position, then pulls himself together: "but that's not what this story is about". Again, he has not been able to tell his story. Halfway through the narrative, we still do not know whether this is because of his preoccupation about how he should tell his story or his hesitation about what the story will tell.

² Rudolfo A. Anaya, Tortuga, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990)

The preoccupation about the telling of the story is a constant one. When the story-teller says "Today a story was created as we hunted along the river", does he use the verb "created" to mean "lived"? Does a story have to be created, i.e. lived in order to be told? Is it the living of an experience which creates the story or is it the words which give life to the experience? This question is poignantly echoed by the story-teller as his story unfolds: "What do the words create? ...In the shadows of the river I make them see giant monsters, unknown enemies which I know are only reflections of the words I use". Is the story-teller a prestidigitator dazzling his audience with the blown-up image of ordinary experiences by the wave of his magic word?

It seems clear that the impact of the words comes from the illusion they create: "they see themselves as heroes". But the illusion must be built upon a reality, the reality of the ordinary experience can thus become an acceptable illusion through the choice of the extraordinary words. The story-teller is conscious of this technique: "In the story ... the stoning of a harmless garter snake becomes the killing of a poisonous viper." This ego-boosting illusion creates in its turn a distortion of the perception of the novices, the two new members of the tribe, "they whacked at a hanging vine and cried out that it was a snake". The story-teller resorts to this trick in order to upgrade himself and the other members, distinguishing them as well as himself from the two novices who thus become a source of mockery. However, the latter's credulity distinguishes them from the others only in degree and not in nature. It is this credulity which is the prerequisite of the success of the story.

How then, is this compatible with the tribal rule according to which the story-teller "must tell the truth"? The story-teller cannot ignore this dilemma:

"I feel the power of my words. But still I am uneasy. There is something I am wanting to say; I want to get to the germ of the story in today's adventure. ... I know I must get to it."

His story continues for a time in the same self-appraising tone, going over the day's events in a chronological order until it comes to "The Place Where the Swallows Died". It is with the utterance of these words that the shift in the narrative takes place. The use of capital letters at the beginning of the words appears to be an attempt to entitle his (oral) story and from thereon a new tone is set. The story begins to betray itself and to create an uneasiness in the tribe. The mention of the "strange writings on the rock cliffs" reveals that they were not, in fact, in "unknown territory". Furthermore, by mentioning the catching and eating of the golden carp he knows that he is evoking an act of transgression but refrains from pointing it out because he knows that he has "already gone too far". Here again, we do not need to know that the reference to the golden carp is from another Anaya novel, Bless me, Ultima.³ But if we do, it allows us to see that the story-teller is yet another member of Anaya's gran familia of characters and that his

³ Rudolfo A, Anaya, Bless Me, Ultima, (Berkeley, California: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1990)

awareness of the sacrilege of eating the golden carp is likely to contribute to the development of his consciousness.

And at this point, although his story rambles on in its previous tone, we begin to feel that the change of consciousness is slowly surfacing. What was up to then a reasonable and even welcomed exaggeration of reality begins to become an unacceptable distortion, what's more a masking of the truth: "Suddenly something in the air is not pure. ... The story has already lasted too long, it is missing its mark." What is needed now for the real story to emerge is an accidental stimulus, which comes in the form of a "golden speck". It is a "flake of yellow, dried egg, encrusted on (his) skin like spent semen" that triggers the turning point in his narrative as we are reminded of his earlier words: "I know the moment for telling the story comes as unexpected as the force of night when one is not quite ready for it."

The story-teller remembers now what he has been trying so hard to forget. The idyllic description of the place of the swallows includes the leader's interpretation of why the swallows are flying high. He reads this as a sign that "there will be no rain ... and that is good because when the rains flood this canyon there is no escape". This interpretation is of consequential importance to the tribe's safety and reinforces the leader's image. However, as the story-teller recalls what followed, he necessarily reveals the incapacity of the leader to "read the signs". In fact, it is the male swallows who are flying high to protect the nesting females and their dance is

that of the jubilation of new life. And it is the leader's angry reaction, "We have been deceived ... it is the season of the eggs!" which betrays him. The swallows have evidently done nothing to deceive them but his hero-image would suffer painfully if he were to admit his incapacity in reading the signs. Instead, in an exasperated act of self-assertion he begins stoning the nests. "The fragile mud and straw came falling down and the female swallow darted into flight, cruelly awakened from her time of waiting." The key-word in this sentence is "cruelly" and its liberating effect definitely marks the change in the narrative stand of the story-teller. At this point the leader's attempt to silence him is in vain, he continues "and the uneasiness I have felt all night leaves me."

The point of no return for the story-teller is reached. What appears to be a sacrificial rite in the killing of the swallows is in fact a meaningless massacre. The initial meaning of the ritual which is to take life in order to enable rebirth, is thus sacrificed through this blind act. It is wasted "like spent semen". The stoning of the eggs, of life in germ, has no other final aim than that of destruction. This is the betrayal of the hero-myth which held the tribe together up to then. This is the tribe's second sacrilege after that of the eating of the golden carp. By evoking the episode of the golden carp the story-teller had sensed that he had "already gone too far". He eventually realizes that he has not gone far enough. His narrative has to go one step further to confront the tribe with the crucial question of who has been deceived by whom?

If the story-teller is to respect the rule of the game "he must tell the truth". The reason why his story has kept "missing its mark" is his refusal to see that he must sacrifice the hero-image of the leader in order not to sacrifice the truth by telling of the sacrifice of the swallows.

If the episode of the killing of the swallows had not been evoked in the terms translated by the emerging consciousness of the story-teller, the tribe might have survived the experience by ignoring or banalising it as ordinary reality. However, the story irrevocably transcends the reality and drives the hard truth home: they have transgressed their own code, they are fake heroes.

As for the story-teller, he transcends himself as the power of his words enable him to renounce the false power of creating illusions for the sake of ensuring his place in the tribe and he is thus able to face being renounced by the leader, for: "I know that I spoke the truth and that my power has been greater than his".

He has perhaps failed the tribe but he has passed the test of being true to himself. At the cost of being alienated from the tribe he has emerged magnified from the experience. Now his narrative no longer needs magnifying words. Things have assumed their rightful place, there is no longer the need to blow them out of proportion: "An animal cries in the dark, a gust of wind makes the sparks fly, then all is quiet again." And it is not surprising that the first words of the story should be "again

our tribe of boys" whereas the last ones are "I must walk alone".

The story-teller has attained a level of consciousness which marks a new stage in his personal evolution. In the process of individuation he has overcome his fear of betraying the hero-myth embodied by the leader and of becoming a castout. The ritual purpose of the tribal hunt was telling the story and thereby earning recognition. Ironically, it is the power of the story which "spoke the truth" that alienates him from the tribe whereas the ritual purpose of recognition is nevertheless attained. It is self-recognition that he has attained through the acknowledgement of the necessity of solitude if the choice is to be freedom. As Joseph L. Henderson points out in his essay on "Ancient Myths and Modern Man":

...the essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual's ego-consciousness - his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses - in a manner that will equip him for the arduous tasks with which life confronts him.⁴

If the "leader" and the "story-teller" may be seen as the evolutionary stages of the same person, we may say that the latter by acknowledging the weakness of the former, manifested in his inability to "read the signs", has thus confirmed his strength by displaying the courage to read the signs as they should be read. By breaking the code he has, in fact, remained

⁴ Joseph L. Henderson, "Ancient Myths and Modern Man", in Man and His Symbols, conceived and edited by Carl Jung (London, Picador, 1964), p. 101.

true to the principle of making the code. And by grasping the truth he has been able to remake the code.

Anaya is, in this sense, re-creating myth. In Aztec myth, according to one legend, Quetzlcoatl had to leave his people because he was against the sacrificial rite and would return one day in the form of a plumed serpent coming from the sea. When the bearded Cortés arrived in his boat from the ocean, they took him for the returning divinity. Their inability to "read the signs", led to their destruction. Instead of seeing the essence of Quetzlcoatl as "soul taking wings to heaven, and ... matter descending to earth" as David Johnson so elegantly describes him in his Introduction to Anaya's Lord of the Dawn,⁵ they maintained their blind grip on the myths of the past which prevented them from grasping the reality of the present and seeing the truth which links past, present and future.

In a like manner, the swallows here are a figure for transcendence, for the freeing of the spirit. Moreover the precise moment of their presence in the story corresponds to the season of the eggs, that is, to the emergence of new life. The leader's inability to read the sign correctly, results in a death-giving act. The tribe thus not only kills life in germ by stoning the eggs, but its own spirit as well, by killing the swallows. The real victims of the sacrificial rite are the birds, but the symbolic victims are the tribe members themselves. The life-taking act retaliates by hindering the

⁵ Rudolfo A. Anaya, Lord of the Dawn, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), p.17.

birth of a potentially emerging consciousness in each individual of the tribe. The act which seemingly represents a step towards manhood, becomes in fact an obstacle in their maturing process. By the essence of their act they have rendered their code dead, it is lettre morte and only the power of the story-teller who "spoke the truth" can enable rebirth. Thus, the flight of the birds merges with the liberating effect performed by the words on the story-teller and the the question "what do the words create?" is answered on a distinctly higher level of consciousness.

To the extent that this reality is constantly linked with the maturing process of the narrative itself, it is furthermore possible to read "The Place of the Swallows" as a figure for emergent literature in general and for Chicano literature in particular. The crucial question of breaking the yoke of the past and finding a new voice is a sword with a double edge. This yoke is, on the one hand, that of the cultural oppressor, and if it is to be broken it is imperative to face it with a solid identity. On the other hand, one's own cultural past can become a yoke that needs to be shaken off, to the extent that its code has become obsolete through misuse in time. If the writer seeks to find this new voice by using the language of the oppressor, as many Chicano writers do, he or she is not only taking chances with being misunderstood and eventually estranged by his own cultural milieu but also facing the challenge of forging cultural identity through a non-cultural medium. In both cases the writer is faced with the risk of isolation, the very thing that his writing, by nature, does everything to avoid. In order

for emergent literature to pass the test in its rite of passage, it would appear that the acceptance of a training in solitude is inevitable.

Anaya is one of the rare writers who meets this challenge head on. In Tortuga, a novel written a few years before "The Place of the Swallows", the same issues are treated in Salomón's story of the killing of the giant river turtle. The story-teller in "The Place of The Swallows" thus informs us that Salomón was once a member of this same tribe, without identifying him. However, in spite of the similitude of the theme in the two stories, in one the narrator tells his story in the past tense, whereas in the other it is in the present tense. Salomón's story is one that has already drawn its tragic conclusions whereas in "The Place of the Swallows" we witness a step-by-step evolution in the unfolding of the story, as well as of the personal development of the "story-teller". It is as if Salomón's ominous words had become a liberating message: "... now I know that at that time I could have forsaken my initiation and denounced the darkness and the insanity that urged us to the never-ending hunt".⁶ A message heard by the story-teller who crystallizes Salomón's teaching in the process of telling his story and thus finds the courage to renounce "the darkness and the insanity". Through his choice he has alienated himself from the tribe but his very act may, with time, pave the way for a new consciousness in the other members.

⁶ Anaya, Tortuga, p.24.

In his essay entitled "Aztlán: A Homeland Without Boundaries", Anaya seems to formulate this as a promise: "My thoughts lead me to believe that the tribes of our species arrive at new stages of communal awareness as they evolve".⁷

The thematic link working its way from the novel to the short story may be seen as a potential for evolution. Anaya backs this narrative strategy with a linguistic one. As compared to his previous works where Spanish is quite often interwoven with English, Tortuga bears few linguistic cultural marks. The main character carries the nickname "Tortuga" throughout the novel, just like the mountain, and both are never named. The setting is an anglo-run hospital for crippled children somewhere in the Southwest and the reader is given a vague awareness that the inmates are mostly Chicanos. In "The Place of the Swallows" absolutely no names are given and the only cultural allusion is made through the word "machete" which is immediately mise en abyme: "Machetes? Kitchen knives stolen from our mother's kitchens and carried secretly to the camp where in the ritual of the campfire they become our hunting instruments." By avoiding the use of names on the one hand and by drawing our attention to the name-giving process through the use of a culturally-marked word, Anaya's linguistic strategy embraces a far-reaching concept. The language, by becoming more and more purified, aspires to achieve a universal context but at the same time allows itself to assess a singularly cultural phenomenon of the Chicano heritage: one must discover the meaning of one's name by

⁷ AZTLAN, Essays on the Chicano Homeland, ed. by R.A. Anaya and F.A. Lomeli, (Albuquerque: El Norte Publications/Academia, 1989), p.233.

understanding his or her destiny, only thus can one's identity be forged.

According to the Native American tradition, Indians always have four names. The first name given to a child in ritual is in relation to a mythic engagement having to do with the land and is secret. The second one given by his peers is a nickname. The third describes the first public act achieved by the person named and the fourth is the one that the person achieves by fulfilling his or her destiny; it is the realization of the first name.

The name-giving process for places is essentially the same. According to Indian belief one cannot know the power inherent in one's name and the myth underlying one's fate unless one has seen or been in the place where it originated.

In this sense the use of capital letters within the text as "The Place of the Swallows" in what we know to be an oral discourse is significant. The story-teller's resorting to the same device further on by giving a new name, "The Place Where the Swallows Died", is in line with the above-mentioned process and attests to his enhanced consciousness. Moreover, "the strange writings on the rock cliffs" are an indication that the place had already received a name in the past but that this past is inaccessible to the tribe, like the ritual first name which remains secret.

On the other hand, the fact that the story-teller remains without a name to the end would seem to indicate that his

maturing process is still underway and he will not know his real/secret name before fulfilling his destiny. Just as Tortuga is never named throughout the novel. We eventually discover that he is Benjie in Heart of Aztlán,⁸ but having not yet fulfilled his destiny he remains nameless. Crispin's handing down of the blue guitar so that he may sing "the songs of the sun", remains a promising prospect at the end of the novel. And even though we rediscover him as Ben Chavéz in Albuquerque,⁹ we find that he is still struggling with problems of identity, both as a person and as a writer. The epistemological questions of how does one read a text (the signs), how does one know what one reads and how does one know what one knows are still not totally unsolved.

It is Salomón, the binding figure between Tortuga and "The Place of the Swallows, who has significantly fulfilled the value-binding relation between his name and his destiny. Here again Anaya merges myth as he lets us see the Biblical reference of "The Wisdom of Solomon", as well as the Aztec-Toltec symbol of the sun (in the hospital he is often called "Sol") in the same name.

The butterfly words which take flight from Salomón's withering body are also the promise of a cultural rebirth, of the newly emerging voice of Chicano literature:

So even the new myths are incomplete. Our heroes have not been able to suffer alone. In their last moment of anguish

⁸ Rudolfo A. Anaya, Heart of Aztlán, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990)

⁹ Rudolfo Anaya, Albuquerque, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992)

and pain they turn to the shadows dancing on the wall...turn to the past and darkness we are beyond all the heroes of the past...We have come to a new plane in the time of eternity...we have gone far beyond the punishment of the gods. We are beyond everything that we have ever known, and the past is useless to us. We must create out of our ashes. Our own hero must be born out of this wasteland, like the phoenix bird of the desert he must rise again from the ashes of our withered bodies...and he must not turn to the shadows of the past. He must walk in the path of the sun...and he shall sing the songs of the sun.¹⁰

¹⁰ Anaya, Tortuga, p.160.

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