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THE SEARCH FOR SELFHOOD AND ORDER IN  
CONTEMPORARY CHICANO FICTION

By

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## ABSTRACT

### THE SEARCH FOR SELFHOOD AND ORDER IN CONTEMPORARY CHICANO FICTION

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This dissertation traces the Chicano or Mexican American fictional character's search for selfhood and order in seven representative works of contemporary fiction. The works discussed include Pocho by Jose Antonio Villarreal, Chicano by Richard Vasquez, Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And The Earth Did Not Part by Tomas Rivera, Bless Me, Ultima and Heart of Aztlan by Rudolfo Anaya, Rain of Scorpions by Estela Portillo and Nambe Year One by Orlando Romero.

Spanning a period of eighteen years from 1959 to 1977, these works reflect a developing view of ways in which the Chicano may arrive at authentic self-definition. The literature suggests that the path leading to selfhood involves a personal confrontation with one's racial and cultural history as a Mexican American. In confronting the traditional past, Chicano characters gain an understanding and recognition of personal selfhood as they experience unity, a communal selfhood, with their people through a shared cultural tradition. Paradoxically, however, this individual self that identifies with the larger Chicano group also transcends itself--transcends the personal as

well as the communal self. This transcendence occurs when the character comes to see herself or himself participating in a universal human search for selfhood and existential order.

The search for selfhood as reflected in the above mentioned works progresses through several stages of development. Generally Chicano characters move from alienation to confrontation and resolution and finally reach transcendence. Pocho and Chicano reflect what I term the general, Mexican American experience of alienation. Characters in these two novels are confused, misdirected persons who cannot define themselves. Tomas Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And The Earth Did Not Part continues the theme of alienation but begins the stage of confrontation with the traditional past. Rivera resolves his character's alienation by presenting the nurturing experience of identification with the Chicano community as a means of overcoming alienation. Rudolfo Anaya's two novels enlarge upon the confrontation/resolution stages by presenting in Bless Me, Ultima the experience of rural characters coming to terms with alienation while dealing with the urban experience in Heart of Aztlan. Additionally, Anaya's novels add a new dimension to the familiar initiation theme in literature by presenting both the Mexican American childhood and the adulthood initiation into a new, more purposeful existence. Estela Portillo's collection of short stories, Rain of Scorpions, presents the feminine voice. Her stories also



Loretta Carrillo

present alienation, and they offer confrontation and resolution as well. Moreover, Portillo's work begins to shape the stage of transcendence when she offers resolutions that go beyond the specifically Chicano experience of coming to terms with the cultural past. This last stage in the Mexican American's search for selfhood--transcendence--is more fully developed in Orlando Romero's Nambe Year One. Here, the central character transcends both his personal, individual self and the communal self he shares with other Chicanos only after he has embraced both. Romero's character comes to see his search as part of a universal, human quest for self-definition.

This discussion shows, finally, that the struggle for self-definition has been taking place in Chicano fiction for the past twenty-five years. This struggle has progressed through various stages of development, and the Mexican American character emerging from this search for selfhood in the novels and short stories of the late 1970's is a person who has arrived at a new, positive vision of existence.

For my parents, Mercedes and Gilbert Carrillo,  
and my husband, Thomas A. Lyson

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## PREFACE

In the years following World War II, Chicano or Mexican American fiction has been concerned with one major theme--the search for selfhood. When we examine representative novels and short stories that deal with the Chicano's experience living in the United States during the twentieth century, we can detect a developing perspective toward ways in which the modern Mexican American character should go about defining who he or she is.

For the Mexican American, the process of arriving at selfhood involves passing through several stages. The first stage is alienation. The Chicano character in the early fiction of the Chicano Renaissance finds himself unable to come to terms with either his Mexican heritage or the American environment that is his new home in California, New Mexico or Texas. Despite the social climate that encourages him to assimilate into the dominant Anglo culture group, the Chicano of the immediate post-World War II period cannot cast off all features of his Mexican heritage, and he does not feel comfortable embracing whole-heartedly American values.

The second and third stages of the quest for selfhood involve confronting alienation and resolving to come to

terms with it. The fiction of the early and mid-1970's presents characters who find the strength and inspiration to confront alienating aspects both within themselves and in the social environment by identifying with their racial, historical past and with nurturing values in the Mexican American cultural tradition. Chicano characters in the works reflecting these stages learn about the glory of pre-Columbian civilizations and about cultural myths of ancient Mayan and Aztec ancestors that can be reintegrated into modern day life in the United States. Chicano men, women and children learn that together they share a rich cultural tradition which can help them find the strength to replace alienation with a sure sense of selfhood that is distinctively Mexican American.

The last stage in the quest involves transcending individual, personal selfhood. The most recent novels and short stories suggest that because Mexican American characters come to terms with their cultural past, they can put the personal quest for selfhood into a larger view. This broader perspective involves seeing the quest for selfhood via the Mexican American past as a liberating experience. The Chicano character is able to see his or her search as part of a universal human search for self-definition.

The four stages of alienation, confrontation, resolution and transcendence outline the road Chicano characters travel in their search for the self in the seven works discussed in this dissertation. Each work is treated as it

portrays, generally, one of the four stages. In addition, the discussion follows a chronological ordering of the novels and collections of short stories to show that each work either continues a particular stage in the quest for selfhood and order or signals a new development in the search.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE SEARCH DEFINED

The metaphysical quest is motivated by a distinctively human passion for order...<sup>1</sup>

The increasingly large body of literature Chicano writers have been producing since World War II is united by a common theme--the search for selfhood. This search can also be called one for self-identity because characters are involved in the general process of acquiring a set of attitudes, beliefs and values through which they develop a sense of themselves as distinct individuals in the society of the United States. The purpose of this study is to trace the development of this search for selfhood and order in representative works of contemporary Chicano or Mexican American<sup>2</sup> prose fiction.

It is important to note initially that the purpose of this study will not be to posit any rigid, precise definition of what constitutes "Chicano identity." Rather, the aim will be to discuss ways in which representative works together focus upon the general path a character must take if he or she is to arrive at authentic selfhood. My discussion will center on the ways in which the works together suggest that the path to be taken involves a personal



confrontation with one's racial and cultural history as a Mexican American. What emerges from this confrontation with the past, the literature suggests, is an enlarged perspective, an understanding of ways in which individual selfhood is arrived at by reckoning with the past and also by recognizing that this self is inextricably bound to the communal experience of sharing a racial, cultural heritage with others. In the works to be discussed, Chicano characters come to understand during the course of their "metaphysical quest" for selfhood that they are spiritually united with their people through a shared cultural past. Paradoxically, however, this newfound individual self that identifies with the larger Chicano group also transcends itself--transcends the boundaries of the personal as well as the communal self. This transcendence occurs when the character comes to see herself and himself participating in a universal human search for selfhood. Ultimately, characters come to see that the individual experience of selfhood brings personal order and harmony as much as it brings order to all of human existence.

This search for the self in Chicano prose fiction can be divided into four stages of development with particular works mirroring one or several stages of the search. Generally, Chicano characters move from alienation to confrontation and resolution and finally reach transcendence. These stages are not presented as rigid divisions that do not overlap, one into the other. Rather, I use them as

flexible, convenient analytical tools that will clarify the development of this particular theme.

The works under investigation will be discussed as each reflects, generally, one of the four stages outlined above. In addition, the discussion follows a chronological ordering of the novels and collections of short stories to show that each work either continues the particular stage in the search for selfhood and order or signals a new development in the quest. What the entire discussion will finally show is that the Chicano search for selfhood and order has been evolving in Mexican American prose fiction for the past twenty years. The fact that early writers such as Jose Antonio Villarreal in Pocho picture confused and alienated characters out of touch with their social environments and with themselves while the latest writers such as Orlando Romero in Nambe Year One show characters embracing and transcending their cultural traditions and themselves points to the development of a changing perspective among Chicano writers regarding the search for self-definition. This development of perspective can be seen if we categorize the works to be discussed as each constitutes or shares with another work a stage in the evolution of the Chicano character's realization of selfhood.

Pocho by Villarreal and Chicano by Richard Vasquez portray what I call the general, Mexican American experience of alienation. Characters in these novels cannot come to terms with their past, neither can they define who they are.

Tomas Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And The Earth Did Not Part continues the theme of alienation but is a pivotal work which begins the stage of development involving confrontation with the past. Confrontation implicitly contains the suggestion of a resolution. Rivera resolves his central character's alienation by presenting the spiritual, nurturing experience of communal identification with the Chicano community as a way of overpowering alienation. Rudolfo Anaya's two novels enlarge upon the confrontation-resolution stages by presenting in Bless Me, Ultima the rural experience of coming to terms with confusion and alienation while dealing with the urban experience in Heart of Aztlán. Additionally, Anaya's novels add a new dimension to the familiar initiation theme in literature by juxtaposing a Chicano child's initiation into life in Bless Me, Ultima with an adult Chicano man's initiation into a new, more purposeful existence in Heart of Aztlán. Estela Portillo's collection of short stories, Rain of Scorpions, presents the feminine voice. Her stories also present alienation, and they offer confrontation and resolution as well. Moreover, Portillo's work begins to shape the stage I call transcendence when she offers resolutions that go beyond the Chicano's experience of coming to terms with his or her cultural past. Portillo's characters are Anglo as well as Chicano and the resolutions to conflicts she offers deal as often with universal human situations as they do with specifically defined situations that involve aspects of the Mexican American's cultural

tradition. Portillo's perspective begins the stage of transcendence--the last in the search for selfhood and order--that is more fully developed in Orlando Romero's Nambe Year One. In this novel, the central character transcends both his personal, individual self and the sense of communal self he shares with all other Chicanos only after he has come to terms with both. In so doing, Romero's character comes to an identification with all men; he, in effect, transcends the selfhood at which he's arrived, and he comes to see his search as part of a universal, human quest for self-definition.

Contemporary Chicano prose fiction presents the critic with an interesting task because its development as part of Mexican American literature is intimately connected with the general social and political milieu in which it has flourished. Contemporary Chicano literature is generally thought to have been given its most recent inspiration and focus as an outgrowth of the political activism of Mexican Americans who gave impetus to el movimiento. Philip D. Ortego has termed this post-World War II formation of a new awareness "the Chicano Renaissance." He sees the outcome of the modern day Chicano movement to be a forceful immersion by Mexican Americans into all aspects of American society. Ortego, in addition, sees the modern day Chicano's extension into the arts and into letters as a relatively recent phenomenon, though he points out that "there were, of course, Mexican American artists at various times since 1848."

Regarding Chicano fiction, Ortego sees the flourishing of this genre as essentially a "post World War II phenomenon."<sup>3</sup>

Tomas Rivera, a well known Chicano author and critic, has also termed the Chicano's emergence into the mainstream of social and literary activity a renaissance: "A Renaissance has been developing, perhaps since the years after the second World War, perhaps as late as the years after the Korean War...which is attempting to concur, and which is succeeding, I may add, in verifying life for the Chicano."<sup>4</sup> Although contemporary Chicano fiction is cited by both Ortego and Rivera as a post-World War II occurrence, it is not confined to depicting only the Chicano consciousness of this period. What it does concern itself with is a developing enlargement of perspective regarding ways in which the Mexican American can arrive at selfhood. This development consists of a movement away from depicting characters who feel alienated and estranged living in the United States and toward showing characters who are able to come to grips with their distinctively Chicano racial and cultural existence. In so doing, characters in later Mexican American fiction experience a sense of selfhood that is the basis for an ordered and integrated vision of existence.

In addition, the latest direction in Chicano prose fiction places importance upon the Chicano's search for selfhood as part of a universal, human struggle for self-definition. This is not to imply that the fiction of the late 70's is no longer concerned with portraying the Chicano

as one who values his or her distinctively Mexican American heritage. Rather, the latest works focus upon arriving at a larger harmony of being where the self can come to recognize its position in the larger, human quest for order. In this respect, the characters in recent Chicano fiction become one with the total human community who are all engaged in "the metaphysical quest." Tomas Rivera has pointed to the presence of this general feature in Chicano literature when he speaks of it being "a ritual of the living, in a sense, a fiesta of the living."<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, Rivera characterizes the Chicano's search for self-identity using the analogy of a labyrinth. He points to the use of the labyrinth in Greek mythology as the "...setting for a search--either interior or exterior--toward the exterior or toward the interior. In either case, the setting provided a setting for search but also for tension."<sup>6</sup> It is precisely this tension-filled search for the heart of the matter--the self--that characterizes the general thematic development of the important prose fiction growing out of the Chicano Renaissance. Moreover, Rivera sees both the Chicano character in fiction and the Chicano writer entering the labyrinth to search not only for the self but also for tools of expression:

This brings us to the Chicano, for he is a complete human, who also wishes to create a labyrinth, who wishes to invest himself in the labyrinth where he can vicariously live his total human condition. However, since he has perceived continually the development of two others, the north American and the

Mexican literatures, literatures which have reached great heights of intricateness and sophistication for their counterparts, more stress is given to finding form or forms for expression. So, we find Chicano literature and the Chicanos in fiction as simply life in search of form.<sup>7</sup>

Rivera's analysis of Chicano fiction as "life in search of form" characterizes precisely the fictional characters' attempts to impose meaning upon their lives. Rivera's analogy of the Chicano's quest for selfhood in terms of the intricate structure of the labyrinth highlights, in addition, the manner in which he views this search as a complicated, oftentimes misleading one, but rewarding once the quest is completed. This initial experience of confusion and alienation is clearly central to the lives of the characters in the two earliest novels of the Chicano Renaissance--Pocho and Chicano. Together these novels represent the period of estrangement which precipitates the search for the self. Together they represent, though written eleven years apart, that period of the Chicano's wrestling with the idea of taking that willful plunge into the labyrinth of the self.

Chicano writers are certainly not alone when they portray alienation, for it is one of modern literature's central themes. Estrangement and isolation usually occur when man recognizes that things in the universe have no intrinsic meaning divorced from what he, as an active consciousness, assigns to them. He begins to realize that he alone is

responsible for creating order out of the chaos of his social condition, and that he must come to know who he is.

Early works of Mexican American prose fiction which display glaring examples of disintegration of the self, of an inability on the part of characters to grasp a recognizable, healthy self show the Chicano confused and misled in his journey toward self knowledge. Gradually, identification with the culture group, with the elements of racial pride and brotherhood begin to provide for later Chicano writers and their characters a center where they can begin to fashion a healthy sense of self. They enter Rivera's labyrinth to begin the tortuous path leading to formation of self. Charles I. Glicksberg in The Self in Modern Literature posits this journey toward self knowledge as what distinguishes and elevates the human quest for selfhood from any other non-self-conscious existence: "The modern writer is faced with the baffling problem of picturing a self that seems to have lost its reality. Dwelling in a universe that seems to him alien and hostile, man today retreats within the fastness of the self only to discover that he does not know himself; but the curse or the glory of being human is that he must at all costs strive to know. He cannot endure existence without some light, however uncertain, of self-knowledge."<sup>8</sup>

There are few lengthy studies of Mexican American fiction, and none address themselves directly to the question of the Chicano's search for selfhood. In "Backgrounds of



Mexican American Literature"<sup>9</sup> Philip Ortego traces antecedents of Chicano literature from Pre-Columbian roots--Aztec and Mayan--to the Spanish Colonial American and Mexican National periods as they have influenced Mexican American literature. Ortego's account is historical as he provides a factual basis for his assertion that present day Chicano literature grew out of a long and rich literary tradition. He describes such literary genres as the corrido (narrative folk song) and the cuento (folktale) as they continue to be reflected in modern Mexican American literature. Helena Monahan's study, "The Chicano Novel: Toward a Definition and Literary Criticism," discusses three novels she terms "Chicano" and divides them into descriptive categories. Monahan terms Pocho an historical novel, Chicano, a popular novel, and The Plum Plum Pickers by Raymond Barrio, an experimental novel. Then she includes a discussion of Tattoo, The Wicked Cross by Floyd Salas and This Day's Death by John Rechy as non-Chicano novels. Her purpose in discussing these last two novels is to distinguish them from those she terms "Chicano": "The title associates the novels with Chicano culture and yet indicates that while the authors are Mexican Americans and the works contain important references to this culture, their major concern lies elsewhere, and their purpose is not to portray the life style of a minority group."<sup>10</sup> The central focus of the dissertation is purely a description and evaluation of these works with regard to characterization, tone, mood, diction, imagery, symbolism,

irony and satire. A more detailed discussion of this study appears in Chapter II in the section dealing with Pocho and Chicano.

The most recent lengthy study of Chicano fiction is Rafael Francisco Grajeda's "The Figure of the Pocho in Contemporary Chicano Fiction."<sup>11</sup> Grajeda's study is much more concerned with examining Chicano authors than it is Chicano novels. It addresses, however, some aspects of the Chicano's struggle for self-definition that warrant more detailed treatment than either Ortego's or Monahan's studies.

Grajeda proposes to distinguish authentic from unauthentic Mexican American fiction using as a basis for judgment the particular path toward self-knowledge and selfhood presented in Pocho, Chicano and Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/ And The Earth Did Not Part. Grajeda sees Villarreal and Vasquez and their characters fighting against a recognition of themselves as Chicanos because neither writers nor characters appreciate the value residing in the cultural tradition which could provide a healthy basis for arriving at self-knowledge. He points to both Pocho and Chicano as examples not only of alienated Chicano characters but of alienated Chicano writers as well. He sees both novels as failures because they are not inspirational. Providing inspiration is a function he claims is Chicano literature's responsibility to fulfill. He attributes this failure to Villarreal and Vasquez themselves laboring under an

injurious self image imposed upon them as colonized men which he terms the pocho view of selfhood.<sup>12</sup>

Then Grajeda discusses Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra as "the creation of a literature that--in authentically rendering the Chicano experience--is to be considered a literature of liberation" (p. 89). Grajeda praises Rivera's work for presenting a character who does embrace his cultural heritage and in so doing announces its worth. For Grajeda, Rivera's work presents the real spiritual beginning of the literary Chicano Renaissance.

Grajeda does see Pocho and Chicano as novels that portray alienation; but rather than view them as reflecting certain realistic, though not necessarily typical, aspects of the Chicano experience in the United States, he prefers to see them solely as reflections of Villarreal's and Vasquez's desire to show only the fruitlessness of the Chicano experience. Given this view, I see Grajeda's interpretation as much too narrow and limiting. The critical fault of his interpretation resides in his complete disregard for placing both Pocho and Chicano in their proper social time frames. Written in 1959 in the period that Ramon Eduardo Ruiz in his introduction to the novel calls "the 'assimilationist' phase that prevailed then,"<sup>13</sup> Pocho surely mirrors the complex emotions Mexican Americans of the period were experiencing attempting to adjust to a dominant culture. Likewise, the portrayal of life in east Los Angeles in Chicano also reflects the alienation not only of Chicanos, but blacks,

women, youth and other minority groups were experiencing in the late 1960's.

While Grajeda's judgment of authentic versus unauthentic Chicano fiction rests in what he perceives to be the writer's psychological state of mind, a more encompassing critical assessment of ways in which these novels fit into a larger perspective of Chicano fiction's development will emerge if a wider critical apparatus is employed. This wider critical vision involves considering Pocho and Chicano as novels whose visions are not merely a reflection of the writers' psychological state of mind, but the reflection of social situations of the periods in which these novels were written that reflect a part of the total Chicano experience. This interpretation salvages these works from the category of novels written by men who have no feeling for their cultural heritage and allows them to be seen as important documents in the development of Chicano literature. Seen in this light, they bring the problems of alienation and disintegration of the self to the forefront which later fiction such as Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra and Heart of Aztlan attempt to answer by presenting various avenues of confrontation with the cultural heritage. In so doing, this later fiction continues what Pocho and Chicano began--a thematic concern with the modern day Chicano's search for selfhood.

Works such as Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra have indeed established, as Grajeda asserts, Mexican American literature as one which sensitively celebrates the ethnic

group's collective identity--its shared traditions, beliefs, values and life experiences. Grajeda correctly sees this work as it represents the way select Chicano fiction mirrors the spirit of brotherhood that underlies el movimiento: "As a 'book of discovery'... 'Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra' is a variation on the Bildungsroman for the focus of Rivera's work is not on the forging of the individual, peculiar and subjective identity; it is rather informed by a concern for the development of a social and collective self-identification. It is not the particular and idiosyncratic which is revealed but the general and the typical" (p. 117).

In Grajeda's view, the above interpretation of Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra as an authentic work because it presents identification with the culture group as the most significant step in arriving at self-definition is the most critical feature of the work. Grajeda elsewhere, however, must admit that the work "traces the universal human situation" (p. 89) and not just the Chicano experience. This universal vision is, in fact, the basis upon which the most recent works of Chicano fiction seem to be operating. Works such as Portillo's and Romero's offer a vision of selfhood and order which goes beyond the confines, though it definitely does not exclude, a coming to terms with the Chicano experience. Interpreting Mexican American prose fiction through a wider dimension than Grajeda offers rests largely in acknowledging that the latest works by Chicano writers

suggest that a transcendence of the Chicano experience allows a larger, more universal vision of the self to emerge.

The present study will illustrate ways in which important works of contemporary Chicano prose fiction show a marked development toward a vision that acknowledges the essential dignity and worth of the vast dimensions of the Chicano experience as the central, integrative aspect in the formation of selfhood. This feature of the discussion will be similar to Grajeda's interpretation of what for him constitutes a "literature of liberation." In addition, however, this study will illustrate ways in which the most recent works posit a broader meaning to the Mexican American's search for the self--that a coming to terms with one's peculiar past as a Mexican American provides the basis for a coming to terms with a larger reality. This larger reality resides in seeing one's self as a person in the universe. This latter phase of the metaphysical quest presents coming to terms with the cultural past as the turning point in the quest for selfhood. The character who recognizes his or her intimate connections with the cultural past is the one most able to integrate this vision of herself or himself into a larger harmonious perspective of existence. This person recognizes that he or she becomes one with all others who search for selfhood and order.

Tomas Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra is only the first of several important and representative works of prose

fiction written in the 1970's which develop the above-mentioned universal vision of the Mexican American quest for self-definition. The Plum Plum Pickers, a novel by Raymond Barrio, published in 1969 is an earlier work that traces the lives of California migrant workers. Its central focus is upon portraying the alienating conditions that accompany migrant labor with small attention given in the last several chapters to the process of confronting the alienation. Though it does function as a continuation of Pocho and Chicano by portraying the alienating features residing in the Chicano experience, it is not being treated in this study primarily because its focus upon the agricultural setting is treated with as much and perhaps more depth in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra. Additionally, the latter work's focus upon confrontation enlarges upon the alienation theme in The Plum Plum Pickers and makes of Rivera's work a much more important one to consider in this discussion.

Other important works that will be discussed include Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima (1972) and Heart of Aztlan (1976); Estela Portillo's collection of short stories Rain of Scorpions (1975) and Orlando Romero's novel Nambe Year One (1976). These particular works have been selected for discussion because they are major ones that share the noteworthy feature of contributing to the development of the theme under question in this study. In contrast with Pocho and Chicano, these works move away from a purely

sociological concern with portraying prejudice and discrimination to explore the spiritual search for meaning.

Charles Tatum in "Contemporary Chicano Prose Fiction: Its Ties to Mexican Literature" makes a distinction between fiction of the 1950's and the 1960's and that of the 1970's by pointing to the latter's tendency to go beyond depicting the Chicano experience as one of misery, hopeless and confusion. He sees Chicano fiction in the 1970's moving toward a new preoccupation with spiritual exploration: "Chicano prose fiction published within the last three years is, among many other things, a confluence, a coming together of several rich traditions of Mexican and Chicano literature to form a unique reservoir of native Mexican Indian myth, Hispanic customs and beliefs, a proletarian view of life in a dominant Anglo society, and a farreaching exploration of the Chicano psyche."<sup>14</sup>

As Tatum here implies, Chicano prose fiction of the 1970's celebrates features of the Mexican American cultural heritage instead of centering on the Anglo suppression of them. Because Pocho and Chicano are novels concerned with picturing the Chicano as the victim of Anglo society, they become for Tatum novels of catharsis which necessarily had to precede works such as Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra. Though they emerge as inferior to later works, they are still important documents in the development of Chicano prose fiction: "A cursory examination of Chicano prose fiction of the late fifties and sixties reveals that many authors deal



directly with social, political and economic problems plaguing urban and rural Chicanos...Characters, while portrayed vividly, are often flat and stereotyped, representative sociological figures rather than multifaceted fictional beings. But in spite of this and other weaknesses, works such as Pocho and Chicano are important to the development of Chicano fiction...These works are cathartic, providing a release from accumulated suffering and frustration of generations of Chicanos...."15

In contrast to these novels stands the more penetrating work of the 1970's, beginning with Rivera's collection of narratives that display a clear structural parallel to Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. Like Anderson's work, Rivera's narratives chronicle episodes in the lives of people in one pueblo [town] and the impact these lives have upon the life of the protagonist. In both works, the protagonists come to understand themselves more fully by realizing their intimate relationship to their people. Rivera's young hero comes to acknowledge a self which had not before existed. He discovers that he himself must order the chaos life presents, that a continual synthesis of life's tragedies, mysteries and joys constitutes his life's task as a human being.

In Rudolfo Anaya's novels, Bless Me, Ultima and Heart of Aztlan, characters confront baffling persons and events which represent the modern day battle between good and evil. Both novels are stories of Chicano characters being

initiated into life. They acquire newfound strength to confront life by recognizing the spiritual strength residing in their people and in their rich cultural heritage.

Likewise, the characters in Estela Portillo's short story collection Rain of Scorpions gather the courage to face life because they recognize a personal selfhood that partakes of a communal selfhood. This collection contains stories that place special importance upon Mexican American cultural elements as integral in the recognition of selfhood and those that do not depend solely upon these elements. In several instances, the movement toward authentic selfhood rests solely upon universal features of faith, courage, brotherhood and love.

The final work to be discussed, Orlando Romero's Nambe Year One, is perhaps the most ambitious attempt in Chicano prose fiction to go beyond the sociological exposé and plunge headlong into an enlargement of theme and sophisticated literary technique. Romero's style has been referred to as "Joycean."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the impact of the novel is one of free flowing images that together picture the central character's "timeless voyage through space in a search for meaning, a voyage into the deep infrastructure of....ancestral traditions."<sup>17</sup> The central character discovers the basis of his personal, individual self by confronting his historic, cultural roots. This journey leads him to discover not only his individual place in history but his place in the community of men, each of whom possess personal

histories. Nambe Year One serves as the clearest illustration of the direction Chicano fiction in the 1970's has taken to propose a broader dimension in which to discuss the Chicano experience.

The result of this study will be to show that major works of Chicano prose fiction share a common theme--the search for the self and for order. To better understand the way in which this development has progressed, we should begin with a brief consideration of the two earliest novels of the Chicano Renaissance--Pocho and Chicano. Together these novels portray the period of alienation in the Chicano's search for selfhood.

## Notes to Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>Charles I. Glicksberg, The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1963), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>The terms Chicano and Mexican American will be used interchangeably throughout this study to identify the literature under investigation. The rationale for this interchangeability of terms resembles that of Fernando Peñalosa's in "Toward an Operational Definition of the Mexican American" in Chicano: the beginnings of Bronze Power (William Morrow & Company, Inc., New York, 1974), p. 193. Peñalosa suggests that both terms are regularly used to identify persons who possess an awareness of themselves as persons of Mexican ancestry. While use of the term "Chicano" sometimes implies a person who is more fervently devoted to the defense and preservation of Mexican American ideals and to the betterment of the Mexican American's lot in society, Peñalosa implies that this distinction has not been established as any orthodox definition distinguishing a Chicano from a Mexican American. The literature under investigation in this study does not voice the distinction noted above, and furthermore does not fall into any orthodox categories of Chicano versus Mexican American literature.

<sup>3</sup>Philip D. Ortego, "The Chicano Renaissance," Social Casework, 52, No. 5 (May 1971), 42-43, 61.

<sup>4</sup>Tomas Rivera, "Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature," New Voices in Literature: The Mexican American, Pan American Univ. Monograph Series (Spring 1972), p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Rivera, "Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living," Books Abroad, 49, 439.

<sup>6</sup>Rivera, "Into the Labyrinth," p. 18.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>8</sup>Glicksberg, The Self in Modern Literature (University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963), p. xi.

<sup>9</sup>Ortego, "Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature," Diss. University of New Mexico, 1971.

<sup>10</sup>Helena Monahan, "The Chicano Novel: Toward a Definition and Literary Criticism," Diss. St. Louis University, 1972.

<sup>11</sup>Rafael Francisco Grajeda, "The Figure of the Pocho in Contemporary Chicano Fiction," Diss. The University of Nebraska, 1974.

<sup>12</sup>Grajeda's use of the term pocho to identify the Chicano character who does not come to terms with his or her Mexican American past stems from ways the term has been used by Chicanos. Technically, according to Grajeda, the term is used to "define a Mexican who has migrated North, or a Mexican American usually, but not always the first generation offspring in the United States of America, of Mexican Parents." (p. 1) He discusses the psychological importance the word carries when it is used to describe a person who has sold out to American values: "As the word 'pocho' is used by Mexicans, it often carries the sting reserved for the renegade who leaves home and family in preference for Yankee dollars en el otro lado [on the other side]." (p. 3). Although Grajeda's statement emphasizes material wealth as the reason for migrating to the U.S., identifying a person as a pocho implies that he or she is willing, oftentimes forced to for purposes of survival, to trade language, traditions and values--in sum, one's culture--in exchange for acceptance by Anglos.

<sup>13</sup>Ramon Eduardo Ruis, "On The Meaning of Pocho" in Jose Antonio Villarreal, Pocho (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), p. viii.

<sup>14</sup>Charles M. Tatum, "Contemporary Chicano Prose Fiction: Its Ties to Mexican Literature," Books Abroad, 49, 435.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 434.

<sup>16</sup>Review of Nambe Year One by Orlando Romero, ed. Fray Angelico Chavez, New Mexico Magazine (March 1977), p. 40.

<sup>17</sup>Review of Nambe Year One, Choice, 13 (February 1977), 1599.

## CHAPTER II

### POCHO AND CHICANO: THE EXPERIENCE OF ALIENATION

What it means to be a person has become the object of much contemporary writing. Psychologists, sociologists, and theologians all contribute their viewpoints toward a better understanding of personhood. At the same time that these writers encourage a deepening awareness of growth into personhood, they are conscious of the many difficulties which present themselves...alienation, loss of identity, fragmentation are frequent descriptions for the tensions in the experience of contemporary man.<sup>1</sup>

The frequent use of the term "alienation" to characterize the experience of contemporary men and women attests to the widespread acknowledgment of man's precarious hold upon himself and upon the environment in which he is forced to exist. When we speak of modern men and women experiencing alienation, we usually conjure up a vision of people feeling out of touch not only with the external forces of the social environment operating upon them, but of them feeling out of touch with the centers of their very being. The tragedy of alienated man is compounded, therefore, by the fact that his experience of estrangement usually involves a radical state of internal as well as external dislocation.

Charles Glicksberg in The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature has characterized man's ultimate quest as a search for order. Indeed, alienation and estrangement appear to be the polar opposite conditions of order, integration and harmony. Alienation can be said to constitute a chaotic human condition in which men and women find themselves out of touch with social institutions in their environment, with fellow human beings and ultimately with themselves. In an alienated condition, man finds it impossible to feel a sense of unity with the universe; his world is out of joint, his fellow human beings are indifferent or hostile, and he is a stranger even to himself.

In attempting to uncover a precise meaning of alienation, we immediately confront a state of affairs in which the term has been used at various times and in various disciplines in many ways. We encounter different uses depending upon whether or not we stress a theological interpretation over a sociological one. However close or divergent in meaning the term emerges after specialized use in the different disciplines, however, the aspect of unhealthy separation emerges as a constant. Frank Johnson in Alienation: Concept, Term and Meaning makes just this point in his introduction to this collection of readings designed to clarify the numerous uses of the concept: "...alienation is usually used to describe the failure to find certain propitious circumstances which the individual feels should be available to him. It is the absence of certain events in

the life of persons or groups that ought to be encountered. Therefore, even though the term permits a variety of meanings, it seems that the overwhelming emotional connotations of the term are negative, depicting frustrated and hostile separation from various desirable (and deserved) ends."<sup>2</sup> Depending upon which perspective we wish to stress, alienation can mean separation from God (theological); separation from one's radical, ontological selfhood (philosophy); separation from a meaningful relationship with one's work activity or from the larger social community (sociology); separation from the various internal centers of psychological gravity and health (psychology) and so forth. The foregoing are only a few examples Johnson cites of the types of estrangement contained within each discipline's conception of alienation.

In defining the variety of relationships to which the term alienation can be applied, Johnson distinguishes between four different types of relationships, each operating within different structural contexts. All are popularly accepted as examples of conditions of alienation and provide a framework against which we can discuss the notion of alienation as it will be applied to the novels under discussion in this chapter.<sup>3</sup>

The first relationship Johnson discusses is of the self as it relates to other aspects of the total person. This relationship "describes the relation of the overall person (personality, self or ego) to all components of his own



experiential or psychological being (cognition, feeling, memories, etc.)." This describes rather clearly a form of self-alienation, the type of estrangement we usually attribute to people suffering from various psychiatric disorders such as psychosis or schizophrenia.<sup>4</sup>

The second type of relationship refers to the self as it views itself in relationship to other "selves." Here, the emphasis is upon a situation "where the person relates to himself as another social object in a universe of social objects." One should notice that the element of psychiatric pathology is absent from this specific condition of alienation. The quality of estrangement implied here appears to be more in keeping with what we usually associate with a person "trying to find his identity."<sup>5</sup>

A third category of alienation can be seen in the relationship of the self to the environment. This situation, according to Johnson, reveals alienation as depicted "in terms of the relationships of a person to other persons and objects in his environment (including social institutions, the physical environment bodies of knowledge, etc.)."<sup>6</sup> With this category we are still dealing with the individual level of interaction in the sense that the individual person feels estranged from such institutions as schools or church groups, for example.

With the fourth and last category of relationships--groups to individuals and other groups--we move from the individual to the collective. Since the literature under

discussion is concerned with portraying both the individual and the group experience of alienation, we will need to refer to definitions which describe the individual experience of alienation as well as ways in which it pictures the group's feelings of estrangement. Johnson reveals the various categories of alienation that can occur on the group level: "The possibilities for the relatedness or unrelatedness of groups is structurally as complex as those listed for 'selves.' Alienation can, therefore, occur in the following conditions: (1) group to part of group; (2) group (in its entirety) separated from itself as a social or historical entity; and (3) group separated from other groups, from individuals, or from aspects of the symbolical or physical world."<sup>7</sup>

In seeking to reduce the concept of alienation to a workable one for the purposes of this study, to a concept which can effectively characterize the broad thematic concern of the two novels under investigation in this chapter, we can propose to isolate three aspects of this multifaceted concept. In characterizing ways in which Pocho and Chicano together emerge as a literature of alienation, we will refer to the last three main categories outlined above. Our concern will be to discuss the alienation portrayed in the two novels as centering primarily upon ways in which the principal characters experience estrangement from the self (as a social object in the universe) and from the social environment (as embodied in individuals and groups).

Finally, the novels together will be discussed as portraits of group alienation, making use of Johnson's last category dealing with the relationship of groups to individuals or other groups.

In a discussion of alienation, the general concept of identity is invariably used as a springboard from which to begin describing what alienation is not. Indeed, alienation seems to exist because identity does not. In this light, we might contend that the characters in Pocho and Chicano cannot establish meaningful relationships with the people and institutions in their social environments because they have no harmonious sense of who they are which could provide them with a sense of selfhood, a way to approach the environment. One commentator upon alienation discusses the critical importance the concept of identity has as a way of defining alienation: "Having a sense of identity, knowing 'who one is,' represents the polar opposite of felt estrangement from one's self. Furthermore, identity, like alienation, is an inherently psychological concept. As a definition of the self, it stands at its boundaries, looking Janus-like both inward toward other parts of the personality and outward to the world. It represents the sense of ongoing continuity of one's meaning to others as well as to the self."<sup>8</sup>

The importance of having a sense of self-knowledge, of identity as a basis for establishing harmonious relationships with the environment and with other persons is reiterated by John Macquarrie in his discussion of alienation as

it is understood in the theological sense. In his chapter "A Theology of Alienation" in Alienation: Concept, Term and Meaning, Macquarrie draws striking and coherent parallels between the theological concept of sin and the existential concept of alienation and ways in which both concepts point to the condition of spiritual separation as an obstacle to a total harmony between person and universe. Macquarrie points to the theological conception of sin as the prototype from which existential philosophers formulated their notions of alienation.

The existential notion of alienation implies a separation from the self, the center of authentic existence. The theological notion of sin implies a separation from God--in whom resides authentic existence.<sup>9</sup> Macquarrie goes on to discuss ways in which both concepts are closely connected through their relationship to a third feature:

...the two kinds of separation are closely connected, and each is linked also with a third--separation from other human persons. In Heidegger's philosophy, the inward split (which is alienation) from the authentic possibilities of existence, does, in fact, destroy authentic relations with other persons, and even beyond that, produces a sense of alienation from being, from the whole scheme of things. Conversely, the religious concept of sin which sees the sundering from God as basic also sees this as correlated with the sundering from other persons and from one's own authentic self.<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not we are speaking about Heidegger's "inward split" or of the theological split from God, authentic selfhood becomes an important feature in establishing genuine relations with others and with all that constitutes the

social environment. The constant, recurring condition of separation from centers of coherence or order that dominate all of the definitions of alienation discussed up to this point, characterizes clearly the spiritual malaise that plagues the characters in Pocho and Chicano. These two important novels portray alienation as some Mexican Americans have experienced it.

### POCHO

Jose Antonio Villarreal's Pocho is acknowledged as the first modern Chicano novel.<sup>11</sup> It was the first novel written by a person in the culture group that explored the immigration experience of Mexicans coming to the United States during the time of the Mexican War of 1910.

At the time of its publication in 1959, Pocho received a number of favorable reviews. Several discussed its importance as the first attempt by a Mexican American to portray the struggles of Mexicans adjusting to a foreign cultural climate. In a 1959 San Francisco Chronical review, William Hogan called Pocho "...a raw, passionate, tender, altogether first-rate book,"<sup>12</sup> while a review in Nation in the following year observed that "Mr. Villarreal's beautiful novel is a work of self-expression that earns his people a place as Americans on their own terms."<sup>13</sup> A third reviewer termed it "a brief but perceptive novel;"<sup>14</sup> but two others--one in Kirkus<sup>15</sup> and the other in Library Journal<sup>16</sup>--made reference to the novel's lack of focus and sentimental

ending as unfortunate technical flaws. All in all, however, the public response to Pocho was encouraging.

Pocho's favorable reception can perhaps be explained by several factors. First, the popular literary world was glad to see an "authentic" novel about "the Mexican American experience" written by a Mexican American. Secondly, the stress the novel appears to place upon Richard Rubio's identifying himself as being at least as much American as he is Mexican reinforced the popular pro-assimilationist sentiment of the times. Thirdly, since the novel appeared before the real blossoming of the Chicano movement, it probably appeared to speak for the masses of Chicanos who were supposedly similarly rejecting traditional Mexican values and becoming Americans. The novel was perhaps looked upon by the general public as another novel that encouraged assimilation by Mexican Americans into the dominant Anglo culture.

Philip D. Ortego also appears to accept Pocho as a novel that portrays the confusion among Mexican Americans regarding whether or not to assimilate into Anglo culture when he describes the post-World War II climate of opinion: "Perhaps, what best characterized Mexican American thought in the period from the end of World War II to the close of the 1950's is that Mexican Americans themselves were divided about the promise of America. For while a sizable number of them had 'made it,' so to speak, a still significant number of them lived under conditions that had changed little since 1848 [the time of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo]." Ortego

also goes on to say that besides being "the first truly Chicano novel," Pocho is a realistic portrayal because "it stands in the vanguard of the Chicano novel for depicting the Chicano experience in the United States."<sup>17</sup>

Pocho is the story of Richard Rubio, the son of Mexican immigrant parents, growing up during the depression era in the Imperial Valley of California in Santa Clara. The major conflict is centered on the tensions between the Mexican and American cultures as they clash in the Rubio household. Juan Rubio, ex-colonel in Pancho Villa's camp and head of the family, is the spokesman for the Mexican culture attempting to retain its hold upon the family's value system. Consuelo Rubio, on the opposing side, is the Mexican wife who discovers a newfound sense of independence and brashness in her acceptance of American values. Of course, the person caught in the middle of this struggle of the cultures is the young, sensitive, intellectual Richard who attempts unsuccessfully to bridge the gap between his parents' values. Unable to keep the family together and discouraged by his own inability to decide where his loyalties lie--with his father's nostalgic yearning for Mexico, or with his mother's insistence upon a new life in the United States, or with neither position--Richard leaves the ruined and separated family and joins the Army in search of his own answers.

Richard's joining the army that Ramon Ruiz describes as "a cold, impersonal organization that has nothing in common

with the intimate family group he left behind" is a retreat into further alienation. In contrast to this is the experience of Joe Rafa in Nash Candelario's Memories of the Alhambra. In this latter situation, Joe leaves his father's house and joins the army in order to be free from his father's constant exalting of the Hispanic at the expense of the Mexican features of their heritage. Unlike Richard, Joe finds freedom when he leaves the family group, with the army serving only as a convenient way out for both characters. Each character, however, is headed in a different direction--Richard wants to become part of a faceless majority; Joe wants to accept his Mexican heritage.

Richard does not set off on his search for answers without first rejecting some of the values represented by both of his parents. For example, Richard refuses to take responsibility for his family and become the head of it as Mexican tradition demands. Also, he rejects the Americanization of his home--he refuses to accept his mother's questioning of his father's authority. At the novel's end, Richard is a cynical, disillusioned young man. Villarreal would have us see Richard's decision to leave as the only predictable one, given the unhealthiness of the life he has left behind. Villarreal's chief concern in Pocho is with showing his character's restless search for the self; however, Richard Rubio not only does not come to terms with his Mexican heritage as part of that search, he renounces it. Later Chicano fiction and its critics posit Villarreal's



vision as "unauthentic" precisely because a denial of one's racial and cultural heritage can never lead to a lasting sense of selfhood. One cannot, they contend, deny what one is. Although Villarreal intends to show as authentic Richard's decision to cast off features of the Mexican tradition he finds confining, Richard emerges at the end of the novel as much more alienated than free.

In Rudolfo Anaya's later work, Bless Me, Ultima, a clash of values between parents also accounts for the conflict in Antonio Marez's life. The clash in Anaya's novel centers on the question of lifestyle--should Antonio become an adventurous Marez vaquero [cowboy] or a quiet and dignified Luna priest and farmer? In deciding to fuse the two lifestyles into one harmonious, whole way of life, Antonio manages, through Ultima's guidance, to achieve a sense of integration that eludes Richard Rubio.

Helena Monahan in her study "The Chicano Novel: Toward a Definition and Literary Criticism" interprets Pocho as a novel whose purpose is to show the "unfortunate position in which a man finds himself when he is caught between two cultures." She also interprets Richard Rubio as "a confused person, retreating within himself and away from communal ties, no longer understanding familial roles, acting with selfishness as a pure effort at survival." But more importantly, Monahan decides that at the time of its writing in 1959, Pocho showed truthfully the psychological state of the Mexican American people, that Richard Rubio is "a marginal

man born out of time to a people who lack an identity and who lack the means to enable an individual to formulate his own."<sup>19</sup> While such a judgment upon the Mexican American sense of identity in the late 1950's might be open to question, we should recall that the most prominent feature of the Chicano Renaissance of the 60's and 70's has been a reaffirmation of pride in being Mexican, a pride which had been eclipsed by the pro-assimilationist sentiment popular following World War II, to which both Ramon Ruiz and Philip Ortego refer. Indeed, the important novels and short fiction which have followed Pocho show precisely the ways in which Chicanos have come to confront the alienation found in Pocho and provided others with the means for arriving at authentic selfhood without rejecting the cultural heritage.

Rafael Grajeda's treatment of Pocho in "The Figure of the Pocho in Contemporary Chicano Fiction" though insightful appears to neglect the sociological climate of which Pocho is surely a product. Grajeda criticizes Pocho for suggesting a course of action for the alienated Richard which does not coincide with what is offered Chicanos as a viable and authentic avenue toward psychological wholeness in the mid 1970's. Grajeda's answer for Villarreal's inability to propose for his character a route toward selfhood which would recognize the importance of the Mexican cultural heritage is that he, Villarreal, is as alienated, lost and confused as is Richard Rubio. What Grajeda has failed to perceive is the position Pocho assumes alongside of Vasquez's Chicano in

the entire development of Chicano prose fiction. He has failed, essentially, to see Pocho as an illustration of what the Chicano predicament was before el movimiento. Although he argues convincingly of the novel's failure to be a "literature of liberation" for present day Mexican Americans, what he dismisses too summarily as Villarreal's "novelist-as-pocho" handicap is more correctly the simple fact that Villarreal wrote Pocho during a period when merging into the dominant group's lifestyle and value system at the expense of one's ethnic culture was still a popularly accepted way of achieving personal self-integration and integration into the larger social group.

Both Monahan's and Grajeda's analysis of the character of Richard Rubio shed light upon ways Pocho emerges in the context of later fiction informed by el movimiento as a portrayal of the alienated Chicano who does not embrace his or her culture. Monahan's discussion centers on the deteriorating relationship between Juan Rubio and his wife Consuelo as what precipitates Richard's confrontation with the opposing forces within himself. Richard's conflict, unlike that of Antonio Marez, involves his rejection of either his Mexican or his American heritage. In the social context of the novel, Richard is forced--at least he views it as his only choice--to reject one tradition for the other. The two traditions are presented as antagonistic. Though no less confusing, Antonio Marez's conflict involves reconciling two seemingly antagonistic forces operating in the Mexican

cultural tradition that prove in the end to be parts of one whole, ordered vision.

Vying for Richard's allegiance on the one side is the fact of his Mexican heritage, represented by Juan Rubio's insistence upon maintaining cultural values--the man as the sole head of the family, favoring Spanish over English as the language of the home, and a nostalgic, unrealistic desire to return to Mexico untarnished by contact with the American culture. On the opposing side stands Consuelo Rubio's push for the Americanization of the family. Her challenging of Juan's authority, her reproachful attitude toward his "right" to have other women and her willingness to allow the disintegration of the Rubio family for the sake of her newly acquired views becomes as distasteful and destructive to Richard as does his father's adherence to a standard out of place in the new environment.

Monahan's treatment of Juan's and Consuelo's inability to communicate with or understand Richard's questioning of subjects they regard not open to debate--sex, God, religion and family obligations--illustrates nicely her contention that Richard, at the novel's end, is in a state of confusion and alienation when he rebukes both his Mexican roots and the American intrusion into his family and into his own psyche. Juan and Consuelo cannot hope to understand Richard's increasingly sophisticated search for knowledge, and it is this break in communications between parents and son that holds importance in Monahan's interpretation: "It

[Pochol] is a Bildungsroman in which the boy watches each of his adult supervisors fail in the role of guide as he grows. It almost appears, in fact, that Richard is forced to develop in spite of the adults who attempt to act as his mentors."<sup>21</sup>

While Monahan's discussion of Pocho centers upon Richard's descent into a state of alienation, Grajeda's focus is upon interpreting Richard as the dupe of his own self-indulgent, fatuous search for identity outside the borders of his Mexican heritage. In Grajeda's opinion, a solitary, personal route toward self-knowledge such as Richard opts for (with Villarreal's approval of which Grajeda is highly critical) is unacceptable for a Chicano. Searching for identity outside of the Mexican culture is unacceptable, Grajeda states, because "...the path that the Chicano hero travels toward significant liberation must assume more than a solitary form. He must incarnate his culture. His emancipation, rather than being premised on the utter intact separateness and self-exile of a Stephen Daedalus, is instead based on a clarity and strength derived only through an identification with the people, La Raza."<sup>22</sup>

Based on his definition of the way a Chicano hero is to achieve "significant liberation," Grajeda interprets Richard's final refusal to remain in Santa Clara as the head of the household after Juan Rubio's departure as a refusal to become identified with "La Raza." Grajeda will allow that Richard is alienated from himself and from his society,

but his attitude toward this is a condemnation rather than an understanding of Richard's "alienated" act. Grajeda ignores Villarreal's attempt to show the psychological trauma Richard undergoes trying to reconcile his allegiance to both cultures when the society in the context of the novel demands that he choose one or the other. Richard's environment is certainly a hostile one, yet Grajeda does not give this detail enough serious analysis when he sums up the character's role in terms of "the hero as dupe."<sup>23</sup>

I propose that Pocho is a realistic portrayal of a Mexican American youth's experience of alienation. That Richard does not embrace wholeheartedly either the Mexican or American cultures should come as no surprise to any reader of the novel for Villarreal does not propose that either one offers the protagonist any healthy foundation upon which to build a sense of selfhood. This important point Grajeda fails to plumb accurately, yet his interpretation rests upon the view that the Mexican tradition is the only liberating avenue open to Richard. Monahan perceives the unhealthiness of both the Mexican and the American value system operating in the novel when she observes that "a too close adherence to Mexican custom is presented as equally dangerous as capitulation to all values of the culture of the United States, some of which have been greatly distorted by many of its citizens."<sup>24</sup>

Earlier in this discussion I termed Pocho a novel that reflects the popularity of the pro-assimilationist sentiment

among Mexican Americans of the times. Ramon Ruiz, in his introduction to the 1970 edition of Pocho, makes just this point when he says that the novel reflects the confusion of thinking in the fifties: "In the 'assimilationist' phase that prevailed then, most Mexican-Americans had rebelled against traditional values in their urge to join the American mainstream...The book needs no apologies because it mirrors faithfully the sentiment of its age; on the contrary, that is its strength."<sup>25</sup> Seen in this light, Richard Rubio's confusion regarding which culture he is to embrace becomes not a case of aberrant behavior but probably a typical case of identity crisis that many Mexican Americans were undergoing in the fifties.

The belief that Mexican Americans since the late fifties have rejected assimilation into the American mainstream and have acquired a much firmer sense of self-identification with the ethnic culture can be undoubtedly documented by many sociological studies. I wish to cite only one representative study which shows that over a span of only seven years between 1963 and 1970, Mexican Americans have increasingly begun to identify themselves with the ethnic group rather than with the larger American culture. By implication, the study shows that assimilation has decreased in popularity among Mexican Americans since the general time period when Pocho was written.

In "A Backward Glance at Self-Identification of Blacks and Chicanos" in Rural Sociology, Charles Loomis discusses

his findings regarding his administering a TST (Twenty Statements Test) or a "Who Am I?" procedure of testing in 1963 to measure a respondent's self-identity. His sample was from the general public of the United States, including Mexican Americans in the southwest part of the United States. He reports that during this year "not a single respondent in the Mexican American sample claimed identity with this minority group in any tangible form." He compares this evidence with more recent findings using the same procedure, indicating that in 1970 in the sample from the Yakima Valley of Washington State alone "...no less than one out of four informants in any of the category of respondents identified themselves ethnically." Loomis then goes on to conclude: "It is our opinion from these and other indications that emphasis on ethnicity in self-identification for...Mexican Americans...has greatly increased in the last decade."<sup>26</sup>

Given the above conclusion, it seems safe to say that Mexican Americans have acquired a greater sense of identity with the ethnic group since Villarreal's writing of Pocho. We set out now to explore the condition of Richard Rubio's identity crisis. The discussion of Richard's alienation will center on his deteriorating relationships with parents, the social institutions of school and church, his peer group and lastly, with himself.

Richard's early relationship with his parents is a nurturing one; he feels secure in the presence of his father,



and he associates his mother with warmth and happiness. The household into which Richard is born is traditionally Mexican in that Juan Rubio is the strong authority figure and Consuelo is the devoted, submissive wife. Juan insists that Spanish be the language of the home, and he fosters in his family the idea that their stay in California is only temporary until they can return to Mexico. Though Juan fervently believes they will return to the homeland, as the novel progresses and as the family becomes inevitably Americanized, he inwardly knows that his family is planting roots in America that will never be severed. And this realization is a sad one for him: "...the chant increased in volume and rate until it became a staccato NEXT YEAR! NEXT YEAR! And the chains were incrementally heavier on his heart."<sup>27</sup>

Richard accompanies his father to the Unemployment Council meetings at Mat's barn during the depression years and also witnesses the violence and murder that take place at the migrant workers' strike against the fruit growers in Santa Clara. We see the closeness between father and son develop into a deep love.

In addition, under his father's influence Richard learns to be proud of his Mexican heritage and to cultivate a sense of manhood. In Juan Rubio's mind the two concepts are closely related: "...you are a man, and it is good, because to a Mexican being that is the most important thing. If you are a man, your life is half lived; what follows does not really matter!" (p. 131). Even as a young boy Richard

understands his father's passion for instilling in his son a sense of manhood. When the incident with Joe Pete Manoel sets the neighborhood to thinking that the Portuguese man is a homosexual and has fondled their children, Richard knows his father's anger is caused by his fear that Richard has been one of the man's victims, since Richard has spent many afternoons with Joe Pete. Richard relates that "His father was as fanatical about masculinity as Joe Pete Manoel was about royalty" (p. 90). And Juan's voice is "full of pride" when he answers Richard's statement about feeling attracted to girls: "That is the way it should be, son. That is the only way" (p. 90). Consuelo's timid hope that perhaps Richard will one day become a priest is quickly dashed by Juan because such a vocation is hardly a man's calling. Much as Gabriel Marez protests to his wife against Antonio Marez's being made into a holy man in Bless Me, Ultima, Juan says to Consuelo: "--let the boy be, for he is on earth for other things" (p. 63).

Juan Rubio's view of himself as a man plays a large part in his interactions with his family. He cannot accept them when they become Americanized and question his authority as head of the family. When Consuelo demands that she have equal authority in the home, when the girls insist upon keeping late hours against his wishes and when even Richard acknowledges that they are in America and should live as Americans, Juan leaves and sets up housekeeping with the newly arrived woman from Mexico, Pilar Ramirez. Juan

Rubio's insistence upon maintaining a traditional Mexican concept of himself as a man is a contributing reason for the family's breakup and for Richard's subsequent alienation from his father. Though Richard understands that his father's sense of security and stability is tied in with his being an authority figure, he nonetheless, acknowledges that his father's view is limiting and in some ways destructive. When Richard thinks of his sisters following Mexican tradition as subservient women, he sees the price of his father's holding on to a value out of tune with the American environment.

In his early life in Mexico, Juan Rubio had been a fiery revolutionary in Villa's army. In addition, he had been a champion of the poor man which he continues to be in California when he befriends poor migrant workers, offering them his home and food. Richard keeps in touch with Mexico and its traditions with these people who camp in his back yard during the harvest season: "They held small Mexican fiestas and sang Mexican songs, and danced typical dances, so that there, in the center of Santa Clara, a small piece of Mexico was contained within the fences of the lot on which Juan Rubio kept his family" (p. 43).

Villarreal pictures Rubio as a tender yet passionate man who maintains his manhood at all costs; it is, in fact, the key to his character and to all his actions in the novel: "If a man has been a man, he will always be a man. I know I will be. I will never forget that which is right.

There must be a sense of honor or a man will have no dignity, and without the dignity a man is incomplete. I will always be a man" (p. 15). Paradoxically, however, Juan's view of "honor" and "dignity" must also allow him to see Richard's choice to be a writer instead of a family man as a choice of honor. Richard reminds his father that he has taught him to be a man before anything else: "I was never a nino [child] to you but a macho, a buck...why should I not talk like a grownup?" (p. 130).

Richard's relationship with his mother is also warm and nurturing. Consuelo's affection for Richard is simple and strong. Even when Richard is quite young he recognizes that her love for him is almost childlike in its devotion. Consuelo admits both privately and publicly that Richard is her favorite of all her children: "She [Consuelo] was concerned for this child of her heart. Eight girls she had borne in her thirty-four years, and this was her only son. He had brought her and her man back together, and for that she could never love him enough" (p. 35). Consuelo caters to Richard's needs above others in the family and by the end of the novel, she claims that Richard is her only responsibility and she has after Juan leaves.

Villarreal presents Consuelo as a character who is essentially childish in her thinking, particularly when she begins to clamor for her rights as an American woman. She becomes an extremely jealous woman, listening to idle and untrue neighborhood gossip that Juan is unfaithful to her,

even though Juan has long ago given up his mistress. Consuelo demands to be given equal authority in decision making which she brashly insists is a right given her by her new country. Despite the validity of Consuelo's desire to exert as much influence upon the family as does Juan, the challenging and threatening manner in which she levies her commands to a man unaccustomed to being threatened by a woman makes her appear childish and immature. Richard recognizes the destructiveness of his mother's incomplete and immature understanding of American women's rights. His love for her is not diminished, however, in spite of his realization that her conduct precipitates the disintegration of the family: "...he knew that his mother was like a starving child who had become gluttonous when confronted with food. She had lived so long in the tradition of her country that she could not help herself now, and abused the privilege of equality afforded the women of her new country" (p. 134).

In her relationship with her husband, Consuelo proves herself quite immature. This childish attitude sets in motion the alienation Richard will ultimately feel from his mother. He understands that through her unwarranted jealousy, her refusal to keep the house clean as a sign of her newfound independence, and her threats to throw Juan in jail if he threatens to beat her contribute greatly toward breaking up the family. Her inability to see the destructiveness of her actions causes Richard to become frustrated with her. Richard knows his mother will be hurt at knowing he has

stayed on to care for her after Juan's leaving only because he has not yet decided to set off on his own way. Richard, however, feels he must set her straight, lest she think he loves her more than his father: "I have not gone with my father because you need me more...I love you both but I do not love one of you more than the other...what is between the two of you is not my affair...I am not changed, and I can never be changed by that which is outside of me. I can only be loyal to you both as well as I can" (p. 171).

Richard's alienation from his parents is gradual and it represents perhaps his most critical breaking with that entity which should function as a healthy center of coherence for him. Richard surpasses his parents in learning and understanding; he grows increasingly estranged from them when he begins to question those institutions they consider sacred--school and church. Villarreal presents Richard as an unusually inquisitive child who questions God's goodness when his mother undergoes great pain during childbirth, the priests' and teachers' claims to know better than anyone what is good and right, and the whole intriguing question of sex. In his questioning of God, particularly, Richard prefigures the questioning with which later characters such as Rivera's protagonist in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra and Antonio Marez in Bless Me, Ultima will also wrestle. Consuelo, particularly, is frightened at Richard's blasphemous thoughts. Both parents fail Richard as teachers at the same time that the important institutions of school and

church fail to withstand his penetrating questions. The school fails Richard because it cannot provide answers for him, but also because of prejudice. Richard wants to go to college, but his teachers encourage him to learn a trade as an auto mechanic since that is what most Mexican boys have always done.

Richard's bitterness increases as he grows older when he discovers that both of his parents' view of tradition will prevent him from going to college. Consuelo tells him that after high school, his responsibility is to the family because he is a man. Juan also informs Richard where his loyalties should lie: "Your life belongs to us, and will belong to us even after you marry, because we gave it to you. You can never forget your responsibility to the family" (p. 129-130). This view Richard finds intolerable and unjust. More importantly, Richard's view of Mexican tradition's confining attitude toward family responsibilities underlies his refusal at the end of the novel to become the head of the house: "Then he [Richard] suddenly felt a responsibility so heavy as to be a physical pressure, and first he became sad that his lot was a dictate and that his parents believed so strongly in the destiny, and then he was angry that traditions could take a body and soul--for he had a soul; of that he was certain--and mold it to fit a pattern" (p. 63).

Consuelo dreams and wishes that Richard could go to college, but to her it represents a way for him to get a

good job, make money and buy a grand and expensive house for his wife and children. In this respect, her view is totally American. Her wish is for Richard to be upwardly mobile. Richard finds intolerable his mother's inability to understand that for him college provides a means of discovering himself, of discovering his individuality: "I have to learn as much as I can so that I can live...learn for me, for myself--Ah, but I cannot explain to you, and you would not understand me if I could" (p. 63). Joe Pete Manoel is the only character in touch with Richard's desire to learn about life and about himself. From Joe Pete Richard learns that each man must become his own teacher: "...I am another person and I would do you great wrong to teach you what I feel" (p. 85). Richard appears to realize early that his responsibility to his family borne out of tradition will inevitably clash with his personal view of what direction his life will take when he tells Consuelo: "When the time comes, I will do what I have to do" (p. 63).

Richard's relationship with his peer group appears to provide him with a comforting source of support for the longest time. Richard does experience an amount of prejudice but not from his immediate peer group. The older boys of the neighborhood ridicule him for being Mexican; but as a nine-year old boy, Richard stands up to the insults: "...he told Richard to get the hell away from there, cholo, because they did not want any chilebeans hanging around...why don't you go home and eat some tortillas. And Richard told him he



had just finished eating, and anyway he did not see anything funny about it, because he liked tortillas better than bread any old day" (p. 42). In his relationship with Zelda, Ricky and Thomas Nakano, Richard experiences the typically adolescent explorations with friendship and sex. As they get older and out of high school, however, the closeness between them disappears. Thomas Nakano, the Japanese boy, is relocated by the government because of wartime apprehension about Japanese people. Ricky Malatesta decides to change his name to a more American sounding one, enter Officer Candidate School instead of the regular army, and go to college to get rich. By this time Richard has a full-time job and has sole responsibility for his mother and his sisters--an existence he despises and which causes him to lose touch with himself: "But he sought glory because he was now a part of the infinite nonentity--the worker, the family man. He had slowly dropped into oblivion even in his mind, the one place where once he had soared above the multitude" (p. 180).

In attempting to make the best out of a bad situation and to get a taste for what life and people have to offer, Richard enrolls in a night school writing course. He meets interesting people who appear to have new, liberal ideas about life and sex. But they soon bore Richard when he discovers that they patronize him because he is Mexican. Richard's restlessness also leads him to discover the "new" Mexican immigrants who are increasingly making the United

States their home. Though he does not really feel a part of the pachuco gang he spends time with, they fascinate Richard with their strange language--a mixture of Spanish and English--their zoot suits and ducktail hairdos and their flagrant desire to offend both the traditional Mexican culture and the American culture that wants them to Americanize. Richard attends their parties, takes a pachuca girl friend, experiments with marijuana and gets involved in a gang fight. Richard, however, cannot feel a part of their movement because he sees their self-willed isolation as a shallow form of resistance: "Richard understood them [pachucos] and partly sympathized, but their way of life was not entirely justified in his mind, for he felt that they were somehow reneging on life; this was the easiest thing for them to do. They, like his father, were defeated--only more so, because they really never started to live. They, too, were but making a show of resistance" (p. 151).

Villarreal's view of the pachuco is similar to Octavio Paz's in The Labyrinth of Solitude. Paz refers to the pachucos he sees in Los Angeles as "sinister clowns," and he decides that they call attention to themselves through their outlandish dress because they have a deep need to be wanted by North American society. Paz sees the pachuco's offensiveness as a pathetic attempt to show himself as a victim of society in order to become a part of it. In this way, Paz says, the pachuco redeems himself and breaks out of his solitary condition.<sup>28</sup> As we shall see in Heart of Aztlan,

Rudolfo Anaya will present another contrasting view of the pachuco as a romantic rebel who asserts his Mexican American past because he truly feels it is his destiny. This later view reflects the extent to which recent Chicano writers have refused to see American culture and its values as the norm for behavior.

By the end of Richard's experiences with the pachucos, the impact of his alienation from parents, friends and the entire social environment causes him to renounce any identification with groups forever. He sees his destiny as a solitary man in terms of romantic freedom when he says: "Never--no never--will I allow myself to become a part of a group--to become classified, to lose my individuality..." (p. 153). The bitterness with which Richard comes to this realization and the manner in which he carries it out, however, contribute more toward picturing him as alienated rather than free. When he decides to be free he has no healthy relationship with parents or family; he has renounced any values that either the Mexican or the American cultures can give him; he has no friends to whom he can relate; and he uses the army, though he does not believe in it, as a way of escaping what he can no longer tolerate: "There was nothing to be done now except run away from the insidious tragedy of such an existence. And it came to him that it was all very wrong, somehow, that he should use the war, a thing he could not believe in, to serve his personal

problem" (p. 186). Richard's escape into the army signals his descent into further alienation.

Richard's renouncing confining features in the Mexican tradition allows Pocho to be read as a novel that encourages assimilation into the dominant American culture. One can point out that Richard is able to renounce what Mexican tradition tells him is his duty--to stay in Santa Clara and support his mother--because he's become Americanized enough to see that such an obligation is unjust in the context of the American way of life which teaches independence.

Richard does say throughout the novel that he is proud to be a Mexican, and he promises his father that whatever he does with his life, he will never forget that he is Mexican. In addition, however, to being saddled with responsibility he feels is not his, Richard sees his being Mexican as confining in the sense that he resents what others want to associate with his Mexicanness. Thus, Richard resents the teacher telling him to be an auto mechanic, being encouraged to become a boxer because that is the only way Mexicans can get ahead, and being told by the policeman that he could do a lot for his people if he worked with the law. In this last instance, "the law" becomes a particularly ridiculous career for Richard to consider since the policeman has just finished beating up Richard and his childhood friends, calling them pachucos and accusing them of raping white girls.

Richard's view of himself as an individual will not allow him to plan a life he doesn't want simply because it is what

other Mexicans have done. When Richard comes into contact with the liberal thinkers in his writing course at night school, he experiences the same distaste for people who want to tag him according to their views of Mexicans: "...it pained him when they insisted he dedicate his life to the Mexican cause, because it was the same old story, and he was quite sure he did not really believe there was a Mexican cause--at least not in the world with which he was familiar" (p. 175).

Essentially, Richard wants to be his own Mexican. At the same time, he is aware that he is becoming Americanized and that he has contributed to the Americanization of his family and to its disintegration. When he finally realizes that the family will never return to Mexico, Richard is glad at the prospect of staying in his hometown despite the fact that he feels his life has become dull: "...although he was a product of two cultures, he was an American and felt a deep love for his hometown and its surroundings" (p. 129). During one of the last congenial dinner table conversations the Rubio family enjoys, Richard explains to his father why he speaks English: "'But this is America, Father,' said Richard. 'If we live in this country, we must live like Americans.'" (p. 133). Richard's sisters share his attitudes; they reveal that their teachers have told them they are all Americans, and this they fervently believe. Indeed, the society which Richard and his sisters have become so

much a part of teaches them to put their Americanness before their Mexicanness.

In his pro-assimilationist sentiments, Richard projects himself as a product of his American environment--a situation he can only prevent by moving out of the country. Seen in this context, Richard's romantic view of himself as an individual divorced from groups and outside influences is simply wishful, rather immature thinking. He has become an American. Though he disagrees with the effects Americanization has had on his family life, he knows that he is responsible for much of the American values that find their way into the Rubio family: "He [Richard] was aware that the family was undergoing a strange metamorphosis. The heretofore gradual assimilation of this new culture was becoming more pronounced. Along with a new prosperity, the Rubio family was taking on the mores of the middle class, and he did not like it. It saddened him to see the Mexican tradition begin to disappear. And because human nature is such, he, too, succumbed, and unconsciously became an active leader in the change" (p. 132).

In addition, Villarreal shows Richard's ambivalent feelings about certain aspects of the Mexican tradition. Although Richard reluctantly agrees that his father has the "right" to have other women, he simultaneously feels pity for his mother and for his sisters who are, in the Mexican tradition, doomed to be subservient women: "He thought of his sisters and saw their future, and, now crying, he

thought of himself...he saw the demands of tradition, of culture, of the social structure on an individual. Not comprehending, he was again aware of the dark, mysterious force, and was resolved that he would rise above it" (p. 95). When Richard decides he will rise above those aspects of the tradition he cannot tolerate, Villarreal relates Richard's thinking "...he could never again be wholly Mexican..." (p. 95). From this point on, Richard divorces himself from his father's taking up with Pilar Ramirez and from his mother's new life which she believes will now center on Richard. Juan Rubio maintains his traditional view of himself as a Mexican man when he takes up housekeeping with a woman who respects his authority. Earlier, before the breakup of his family, Juan has thought to himself: "A man must have a house, place his family within it, and leave no room for authority but his own, for it was the only place a man could have authority" (p. 122). Juan's breaking with the family is a critical point in the novel, for it signals his reaffirmation of his view of the Mexican tradition when it no longer finds acceptance among the other family members. When he decides to be unfaithful to Consuelo, Juan goes to the wife of his friend Cirilo, and we are told: "He [Juan] had returned to former custom and he would never again be weak nor would he compromise another time" (p. 136). Richard's disassociation, however, from his father's actions and from his mother's future plans signals Richard's final

turning away from those parts of being Mexican that he finds confining.

Though Villarreal does not hold up the American culture as one to be admired, he does show that Richard is ultimately a product of his American environment. Richard emerges much more of an American than he does a Mexican. The most critical action he takes--disavowing responsibility for the Rubio family--is a severing from the Mexican tradition. The idea that Richard's view of his Mexicanness is limiting can be seen in his annoyance at people who want to see him as a Mexican rather than as an individual: "What the hell makes people like that anyway? Always worried about his being Mexican and he never even thought about it, except sometimes, when he was alone, he got kinda funnyproud about it" (p. 108).

Richard, at the novel's end, has not established any healthy sense of identity and does not come to experience a genuine sense of self-knowledge. This condition also leads to his inability to establish a harmonious relationship with the social environment. Richard's experience of alienation is made clear in the last sentences of the novel when he recognizes that he does not know what meaning his life has thus far had: "Of what worth was it all? His father had won his battle, and for him life was worthwhile, but he had never been unaware of what his fight was. But what about me? thought Richard" (p. 187). Though in a state of bitter confusion, Richard voices simultaneously his desire to come



to know himself, to live because he has much to learn about himself: "Because he did not know, he would strive to live" (p. 187). This note of optimism, of an attempt on Richard's part to try to bring meaning to his life, saves Pocho from being merely a gratuitous display of psychological suffering. We see that Richard's ultimate goal is a quest for a kind of order. While Pocho remains essentially a study in alienation, Villarreal has managed to make his character's experience of dislocation hold the possibility of being transformed into a healthier living experience.

#### CHICANO

Richard Vasquez's Chicano was first published in 1970 and has since undergone four additional printings. The novel came eleven years after Pocho and was the second significant novel written by a Mexican American to treat of the Chicano experience.

Chicano was relatively well received in 1970; reviewers considered it a timely portrayal of the hardships faced by minority groups in the United States. One review in The Booklist pointed out that "...the descriptions of the people as a distinct culture and the account of the frustrations they face are realistic."<sup>29</sup> Another review in Bestseller called Chicano "a story of the 'brown ghetto' and not only a social document but an internal revelation and a narrative of a family migration facing unknown forces."<sup>30</sup> As did a number of other reviews appearing in 1970 in the New York

Times Book Review,<sup>31</sup> the International Migration Review,<sup>32</sup> Choice,<sup>33</sup> and Library Journal,<sup>34</sup> the Booklist and Bestseller reviews referred to the novel's technical defects, particularly, in characterization. Other defects spelled out in the reviews included a judgment upon Chicano as "a 'now' story; not great literature."<sup>35</sup> Still another review faulted Vasquez with authorial intrusions in his attempt to describe the problems faced by Chicanos, causing his language to be "forced and alien to conversation."<sup>36</sup>

Herminio Rios' review of Chicano in the 1970 Spring issue of El Grito was the only one by a Chicano critic in 1970, and it levied the harshest criticism of Vasquez for his reliance upon stereotypical characters and interpretations of the Chicano's social and psychological situation. Rios' criticisms are based on his observation that the Mexican American characters in Chicano are inaccurate representations of Chicanos because they are based on prejudiced, Anglo-inspired conceptions of Mexican American's physical and personality characteristics. Rios illustrates his point by outlining aspects of Vasquez's male characters: dominating men suffering from macho complexes who are also wife beaters and philandering, lower class people who lack taste and refinement; females who are more often than not passive and resigned to their fate as subservient women.

The most important criticism Rios has of Chicano centers on Vasquez's explaining away his characters' self-defeating actions and values in terms of their attachment to

traditional Mexican culture. Rios faults Vasquez with drawing Chicano characters who hold unhealthy and atypical views regarding marriage and child rearing, for example. Rios claims that Vasquez explains away his characters' unhealthy values by attributing them to traditional cultural influences rather than to social circumstances.

Another harsh review of Chicano appeared in 1975 in the Mexican American journal Entrelinéas. Here, Francine Ginsberg echoes Rios' criticism of the novel's reliance upon stereotypical characters; she also criticizes Vasquez's inability to portray the subtlety or complexity of his characters' psychological and social situations. Amid their criticisms, however, both Rios and Ginsberg admit that Vasquez manages to present some real problems faced by Mexican Americans--prejudice, lack of education and job opportunities and drug addiction. Rios writes that "undoubtedly Richard Vasquez feels intensely the problems of his people" (p. 70).<sup>37</sup> Ginsberg faults Chicano with having "...little redeeming humor or real insight into motivation," but allows that "The notes of condescension and indifference which denote the Anglo responses to immense social striving and pain mark the only pathos in the novel."<sup>38</sup> With regard to technique, Chicano's rather bland prose did not fare well with any of the critics though the consensus of opinion was that the novel did expose the problems, frustrations and tragedies that characterize a part of the Chicano urban experience in the United States.

Chicano traces the history of three generations of the Sandoval family as they emigrate around the turn of the century from Mexico during a time of civil unrest to rural, southern California. They are in hopes of finding a brighter, more prosperous future. The Sandovals endure several years of poverty and hardship before Neftali Sandoval and his two sisters, Hortensia and Jilda, upon the death of their father and their mother's return to Mexico, are forced to establish new lives and new means of livelihood. The two sisters find prostitution profitable; Neftali sets out for a small rural community near Los Angeles where he marries, raises a family and spends the rest of his life. From this point on, the bulk of the narrative deals with the lives of Neftali's two children, Angelina and Pete, and their attempts to find success, fortune and acceptance in Los Angeles. In addition, the lives of Pete Sandoval's two children, Sammy and Mariana, occupy the last section of the novel which chronicles the disintegration and failure of Neftali Sandoval's descendents to establish a healthy and harmonious life in the United States.

Both Monahan's and Grajeda's treatment of Chicano reflects the same criticisms pointed out by a majority of reviewers. Monahan outlines Vasquez's reliance upon stereotyped characters--both Mexican and American--and faults Vasquez with presenting a story of failure and destruction without offering alternative, positive modes of conduct to

offset the materialism and rejection of traditional cultural values that takes place in the novel.

Grajeda, in keeping with his task of explaining Chicano's failure to be a "literature of liberation," attributes the novel's major defects to Vasquez's own "tenuous hold on himself as a member of the very people that he attempts to depict."<sup>39</sup> Grajeda reiterates Herminio Rios' criticism of Vasquez's failure to present or explore deeply enough what are in reality the complex causes for the pathetic failure of the novel's Chicanos to attain an amount of self-knowledge and order in their lives. Grajeda levies the same "novelist-as-pocho" criticism upon Vasquez as he does upon Villarreal and focuses upon this handicap as the backdrop against which Vasquez as the omniscient narrator reveals his own rejection of certain Chicano attitudes--ones Grajeda feels need no apology. Grajeda contends that by directing an authorial criticism, for example, of his Mexican American characters' lack of taste in food, clothing and general personal appearance, Vasquez reveals his own acceptance of Anglo standards of taste and refinement. Grajeda's entire criticism of Chicano rests on the assertion that Vasquez labors under a severe inferiority complex and for this reason cannot write an inspirational novel for Mexican Americans.

While it is true that Vasquez is concerned with portraying visions of alienation from social order and integration, by dismissing this vision as irrelevant, Grajeda

reveals his own narrow vision of the total development Chicano prose fiction has been undergoing. He seems not to see that the experience of alienation had to be acknowledged and purged before a literature portraying order and integration could be born. While we cannot ignore criticisms such as Rios' and Grajeda's of Vasquez's failure to present complexity of character and situation, we should acknowledge that Vasquez's principal objective is to explore and assault the enervating condition of alienation.

Chicano's participation in a literature of alienation can be seen through the portrayal of deteriorating human relationships in the novel. As a group, the Chicano characters are estranged from aspects of their Mexican culture, from other Chicanos, from parents and family, from members of the Anglo social environment and lastly from the personal self. Vasquez centers this general experience of alienation on the Chicano's immigrant experience, upon the attempt to come to terms with the pressures of a new life in the United States.

Hector and Lita Sandoval cross the border into California to escape the federales from whose ranks their young son, Neftali, has escaped. The Sandovals settle into a two-room shack with their son and two daughters and begin a life of hopeless poverty. Hector manages to find himself and Neftali jobs picking crops, but their wages are enough only to feed and clothe the family with a bit left over for Hector to get drunk on paydays. The Sandoval children grow

up knowing only poverty, but each aspires to a better, material way of life.

Hortensia becomes a maid to an American family where she sees for the first time the comforts money can buy-- furniture, clothes, food and a comfortable house with indoor bathrooms. Not long into her job, Hortensia is raped by the delivery man and then by her employer, Mr. Wadsworth. Shortly thereafter, she moves to the town district and along with her sister, Jilda, becomes a prostitute. When Neftali discovers what his sisters have become, he is sad for what their leaving Mexico has forced them to do to earn a living. But Jilda is a realist when she remembers the poverty she knew in Mexico. She represents the materialistic attitude that will eventually characterize the desires of future members of Neftali's own family: "Don't you remember, brother, the hunger, the nothing we had, no clothes, beans and corn every day, a big occasion when we had a chicken? Well, now I eat chicken whenever I want. Hortensia and I have a room all our own, on the edge of the barrio, where we buy things we like, that we never dreamed we could own in Mexico."<sup>40</sup>

The need to survive in a hostile environment forces Jilda and Hortensia to become bitter and alienated women despite the physical comforts they manage to acquire. Because of their lives as prostitutes they define and limit the boundaries of their social interaction with others. In addition, they are alienated from and, to a large extent, blame the Anglo community for their situation: "...it's bad

enough to be a Mexican in this country without being honest. You either have to be a maid and screw the patron, or marry an orange picker and live in a shack in the barrio bajo. The gringos won't let you go to the park or the beach" (p. 40). Neftali Sandoval does not share his sisters' desire for material comfort; he voices a passive attitude of wanting only a small share of the good life. He tells his sisters when they ask whether or not he has encountered prejudice or if he has been kept from working: "Yes, I have. But we've got to know our place. I heard of a little town, it's called Rabbit Town north of here, near Los Angeles. It's a little city of mejicanos like us...I'm going there, where I can live in our own town and still find work only this country offers" (p. 54). Neftali sets out for Irwindale to make his simple dream come true when Hector dies and Lita's childhood sweetheart comes to take her back to Mexico.

Once Neftali sets about to building his simple house in Rabbit Town, he falls into a predictable life style that never changes throughout the novel. He marries Alicia, his neighbor's daughter, and together they raise six children. Neftali's jobs range from being town zanjero--keeper of water cisterns--to selling wood for fuel to being an orange picker and packer. The city eventually modernizes by installing water pipes and natural gas lines. Neftali loses his job as zanjero, and the city no longer needs wood for fuel. He settles down to being an orange packer for the



rest of his life. We see that though progress comes to Irwindale, Neftali never participates in it. His complacent attitude toward life contrasts sharply with that of his children, especially Angie's and Pete's, who finally challenge their father's static way of life.

The relationship between Neftali and his two children presents a clear picture of alienation within the Mexican family. Both Angie's and Pete's rejection of Neftali's unproductive life is deeply tied to their resentment at being relegated second class positions in the family because of their father's preference, in keeping with Mexican tradition, for the eldest son, Gregorio: "The eldest son would be second in command in the family. He would be consulted (and only he) concerning any plans regarding building, moving or the acquisition of anything material. He would inherit, regardless of the needs of any of the other siblings. If the family could afford only one education, or only one of anything advantageous, it would be his" (p. 70). All but Gregorio are forced to quit school at sixteen years of age and contribute their wages towards Gregorio's schooling. Neftali plans to establish Gregorio as a cobbler with his own shop and never once considers that his other five children might also want to learn a trade.

The strong-willed and ambitious Angelina is the first to rebel against her father. She is bright and attractive and soon learns that the outside world cares nothing for her father's traditional views about child rearing. As the rest

of the Sandoval sons go off to fight in World War II and return home to see the injustice of their father's views, Angie gains allies, with Pete as her strongest supporter. The confrontation between parents and children occurs when Gregorio is killed in combat, and Neftali refuses to allow Victorio, the second eldest son, to continue with plans for the cobbler's shop. Angie and Pete openly deride the old traditions to their brother who tries to defend them in the presence of their father. Angie's bitterness at being her father's pawn is clearly at the root of her rejection of Neftali and the way of life he represents: "Oh crap! I'll tell you how sacred the old traditions are. If things had really been rough, he'd have married me off to the first cholo that came along when I was fifteen. But I was able to work all the time. So that makes him extremely selective in my behalf....I've had it and I'm getting the hell out of here, and if you guys are smart, you won't come back" (p. 77). Pete also decides he will not return to the family home after the war. He feels betrayed by the tradition which has placed his older brother ahead of him in his father's eyes: "...I'm good enough to work hard in the field from age sixteen, but not good enough to learn to use the tools I sweated to help buy. Since I've been in the Army I've learned other people don't live like we do. Not even the mejicanos in the cities. They laugh and say we're Mexican hillbillies" (p. 78).

Neftali is at a loss to understand Angie's and Pete's bitterness. He again voices the sentiment that had he never left Mexico, the situation with his children would never have happened. In addition, Neftali blames Angie and Pete for wanting to emulate "the gringos who have no sense of proper behavior" (p. 78). His alienation from his children stems from his inability to recognize that they have what he lacks--American style ambition. Though the parting between children and parents is not without tears and sadness, Angie's and Pete's resolve to set out for the city is the passion with which they appear to be most in touch.

Vasquez devotes Chapter III of his novel to describing the character of Julio Salazar, the man who eventually becomes Angie's husband and partner in her successful restaurant in East Los Angeles. Like Angie, Julio is ambitious and concerned with making money. Vasquez shows this love for money to be what dominates Julio's actions even from childhood. Thus, Julio runs back into the tavern where his father has killed a man in order to collect the forgotten change on the counter. Later on, Julio thinks up the scheme of transporting illegal aliens as migrant workers to surrounding growers. With Rosa as his partner, Julio makes a large profit, but is not content until he tips off the immigration service just before payday in order to collect a large kickback from a grower who will not have to pay the illegal workers. Julio's entire reason for marrying Angie is to share in her profits from the restaurant. The large

difference between these two characters is that Angie is hardworking and honest while Julio prefers to make money quickly and, if need be, dishonestly.

Although Vasquez is quite clear about portraying Julio as a self-seeking person completely alienated from any value not associated with wealth, we must also be aware of evaluating Julio as he reflects his social environment. As a child, Julio sees the Anglo ranch owner's child's birthday party, complete with cake and ice cream and shiny, new bicycles and toys. Julio knows they would never invite him to join the party because he is barefoot, ragged and Mexican. Julio also sees his father humiliated by not being allowed to use rest rooms at gas stations. Most importantly, Julio learns by observing that only those Mexicans who take on the characteristics and attitudes of the Anglos are even acknowledged by Anglos: "He [Julio] had seen Mexicans go into American restaurants and stores. And he had studied the ones who did. He saw that they dressed in pressed pants, spoke English well, used American slang, and above all, he noticed, they looked at the dirty ragged little children, the young adults with defeat and humiliation on their faces, with the same look the attendant had given his father for sneaking into the restroom" (p. 91).

Julio's desire to become successful and important leads him to enroll in business college to learn accounting so that he will become indispensable to Angie in running the restaurant. Once successful, however, Julio feels he must

move on to greater arenas. His greed leads him to become involved in illegal drug trafficking, using the restaurant as a go-between location for delivery. Though Julio stops physically abusing Angie, he continues to have affairs with women who frequent the restaurant. Julio Salazar emerges, finally, as a misdirected, alienated character out of touch with any nurturing values.

So, too, are Pete and Minnie Sandoval alienated from values that involve care and responsibility for their children's personal and psychological welfare as well as material security. Pete's ambitiousness leads him to learn masonry and to become a highly skilled laborer, commanding high wages. This feat in itself Vasquez does not criticize. Rather, what Vasquez does present as harmful is Pete's complete involvement with making money at the expense of proper attention devoted to his two children, Sammy and Mariana.

In attempting to do away with the Mexican tradition of favoring the eldest son, Pete insists upon treating Mariana with more attention than her twin brother Sammy. Pete, in his ignorance, cannot see how he recreates in his own family the favoritism which embittered him against his own parents. Sammy, as to be expected, develops feelings of inferiority. His increasing problems with the English language and the scorn he receives at the hands of teachers and classmates is never given much consideration by Pete or Minnie. Mariana, on the other hand, develops into an intelligent, sensitive

and sympathetic child in spite of the favoritism shown her by her parents.

As parents, Pete and Minnie are failures because their lives are entirely taken up with showing the neighbors they can buy the most expensive car or household appliance. They are even naive enough, Vasquez shows, to think their money can buy them acceptance into an Anglo, middle class suburb. Of course, it cannot. Prejudice drives the Sandovals back into the barrios of east Los Angeles where Sammy drops out of school with his father's encouragement: "Don't worry. I got bad marks too. When you're old enough so you don't have to go to school, you have a good job with me. You'll make more money than most gringos, watch and see" (p. 182). Predictably, Sammy degenerates into a heroine addict, partner in Julio's illegal drug trade and in an illegal abortion racket, and, finally, an indirect accomplice in his sister's death. Sammy emerges as perhaps the most alienated character in the novel. He relates to no one, spending his time in a drug-induced stupor. However, what we must acknowledge, as Vasquez intends for us to, is that Sammy is very much a victim of his parents' scramble for wealth.

In the character of Mariana Sandoval, Vasquez has tried to draw a character in touch with the center of her personal being and with her cultural heritage. She, like her brother, is a victim of her parents' misguided values but unlike him manages, to a degree, to establish a sense of pride in herself as a person and in being Chicana. Vasquez

tries to establish this sense of Mariana's strength of character by linking her to her grandfather, Neftali Sandoval, with whom she has a warm and special relationship. However, Neftali, as Vasquez draws him, is not a character capable of representing a totally healthy sense of affirmation. Vasquez's descriptions of Neftali's passivity lead the reader to see him as static and complacent. One such example is in the description of Neftali's employment in a packing plant:

At the plant the foreman sometimes became exasperated with Neftali's slowness and inability to change work habits, or adapt to new methods, but no one ever said anything to him. Management liked him, as he had worked for the same wages for many years, had maintained the same output--almost anyway, and never once complained of anything or asked for a raise. He had never shirked, never been late, and never missed a day. It didn't matter that he'd never learned English, Old Sandoval was an ideal employee. Maybe a little slow, but then, the company didn't pay him much either. (p. 167)

As Vasquez would appear to have it, Neftali and Mariana alone among the Sandovals are in touch with the spiritual side of life. Through her special affection for and understanding of their way of life, Mariana is supposedly the only character who truly appreciates the old folks and the old Mexican traditions they represent. This effect is diminished, however, by Vasquez's ambiguous treatment of Neftali Sandoval which in turn detracts from the integrity of Mariana's character.

Vasquez devotes the entire last section of the novel to a description of the relationship between Mariana and David

Stiver, the Anglo sociology student at the university. The relationship is clearly a study in the clash of cultures and the extent to which each person emerges as alienated from the other.

David Stiver thinks himself liberal, educated and knowledgeable about Mexican Americans. Mariana is able to show him, however, that his pre-conceived views are as shallow as any he himself would call prejudiced. Stiver comes to see, for example, that he doesn't really understand the way Mexican American people relate to each other socially, or why they enjoy particular foods prepared in special ways. Most importantly, David comes to see that he is tied to his middle-class background. When Mariana becomes pregnant by him, David cannot allow himself to marry her and bring her into the middle-class life he has planned for himself as a sales supervisor. The most irresponsible aspect of David's character, moreover, rests in his deciding to accept himself as a traitor to Mariana when he refuses to marry her and talks her into having an illegal abortion. David decides that he must betray Mariana because what is at stake for him is worth any measure: "No one involved here, Mariana's parents, her brother, she herself, could realize the importance of what was at stake. His family reputation, the position in society that awaited him, the relationship with his circle of friends at school, friendships he would have all his life, were jeopardized now if he became involved in a scandal" (p. 322). In a moral sense, Vasquez presents



Stiver as the most alienated character in Chicano; he is certainly the most immoral character--he is alienated from any value associated with honesty and compassion.

On the other hand, Mariana Sandoval appears to be the least alienated of Vasquez's characters. David is initially attracted to Mariana's poise and strength of character, to her attachment to her culture and to her people. Even as a child, Mariana displays a certain mature insight into the injustices her brother Sammy experiences at the hands of her parents and school teachers. Mariana also understands David Stiver in the context of his Anglo, middle-class background that has not allowed him to appreciate Chicanos and their way of life. In this light, Mariana is not as alienated as other characters because she has the capacity to understand the people around her; she is able to fit them into a larger understanding of her social environment.

In the end, however, Mariana and David are definitely alienated from each other. Their relationship cannot withstand the trauma of Mariana's pregnancy. Stiver callously retreats into the comfort of his Anglo background and even intellectualizes his whole affair with Mariana: "He [Stiver] tried to put the events of the past several months into perspective and order. The Mariana Episode, he decided, he would classify all that. He tried to place it as an era in his memory bank. Something that began at a certain place in his life and ended just as abruptly. And with finality. Yes. It was an experience now. Why should he regret it?

We were all richer for any experience, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant" (p. 317). Though Mariana knows Stiver will never marry her, she wants to take her pregnancy to term and bear Stiver's child because she loves him. Stiver, wanting only to avoid scandal, cannot allow that situation. Mariana consents to the illegal abortion arranged for by Sammy Sandoval through David Stiver. Ironically, Sammy never knows that his sister's death is caused by complications arising from an abortion he has arranged. To deepen the aura of family disorder, Sammy is arrested by narcotics officers through a tip-off call from Stiver who decides to expose Sammy's drug smuggling for fear Sammy will blackmail him about Mariana's abortion. But Stiver soon realizes that Sammy's constant state of heroine-induced stupor keeps him from connecting Mariana with Stiver. The novel ends with Mariana's funeral which Stiver reluctantly attends. After a tearful encounter with the grief-stricken Neftali Sandoval, Stiver heads toward his college graduation services, glad to place the whole episode with Mariana behind him.

Several disturbing points in the last section of Chicano keep it from having the forceful, tragic effect Vasquez obviously intended. That Mariana's strength of character deserts her when she becomes convinced of the inevitability of the whole affair with David Stiver and consents to the abortion detracts from her heretofore forceful character. Her failing to retain the sense of control that has all along been the basis of her character accounts for

her deathbed absolution of Stiver by denying that he was the man by whom she was pregnant. This action detracts from her position as the enlightened character in the novel in that she succumbs to and forgives a person who ultimately shows no redeeming character traits. David Stiver, in fact, betrays Mariana. In another vein, he is perhaps too much the stereotyped Anglo who becomes unbelievably crass, unfeeling and even Machiavellian as he rushes from Mariana's grave site to the university campus for his commencement exercises.

While Vasquez's characters could certainly benefit from more depth, the final section of the novel does manage to sustain a level of meaning that he has developed throughout the novel. Mariana's death represents the final and most pathetic incident in a series of events that chronicles the cycle of alienation that is the lot of Mexican Americans in the United States. Mariana is Vasquez's only character who has the potential for striking out for a different relationship with her environment. Unlike her parents, she is not concerned with showing others her worth in dollars. Though she is the victim of prejudice, she understands why people hold such biases, and she at least hopes to rise above them. The best of Vasquez's characters, however, falls short of establishing a genuine sense of harmony with herself and with her environment.

The causes underlying Vasquez's vision of alienation in Chicano are twofold: (1) the embracing by Chicanos of a

system of false and misplaced values which places material wealth before personal growth and pride in maintaining worthwhile cultural values; (2) the Anglo community's prejudice against Mexican Americans which does not allow them full and equal participation in society. The unhealthy and alienating situations in Chicano are, therefore, created by Chicanos themselves and are also products of society's biases. The Mexican American characters in Chicano create their own traps and are just as much trapped by the society which David Stiver represents. As is Richard Rubio, the characters in Chicano are out of touch with centers of coherence. In their efforts at survival, they cannot take time out to evaluate the quality of direction of the lives they lead. Instead of becoming the masters of their lives, they find themselves the confused victims of a society they don't understand. In the end, they are alienated even from themselves.

Pocho and Chicano are important works that make up the period in Chicano fiction which focuses on portraying the experience of alienation. In the next chapter we will examine Tomas Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra. This work acknowledges the same hostile environment present in Pocho and Chicano, but its vision exerts a controlling force over it and uses it, ironically, as a means whereby the Chicano can come to know himself and his relationship to his environment and to at last, become master of it.

## Notes to Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Enrico Garzilli, Circles Without Centers, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Frank Johnson, "Alienation: Concept, Term and Word" in Alienation: Concept, Term and Meanings, ed. Frank Johnson (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup>One should note here that Johnson presents these categories not as examples that show the particular usefulness of the term, but as ones which show its catchall, imprecise nature. This study proposes to make use of several of Johnson's categories as tools to aid in a discussion of alienation because they offer viable ways to discuss and clarify the concept of alienation as I see it functioning, in a broad sense, in the two novels discussed in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, "Alienation: Concept, Term and Word," p. 39.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Oken, "Alienation and Identity: Some Comments on Adolescence, the Counterculture and Contemporary Adaptations" in Alienation: Concept, Term and Meanings, p. 86.

<sup>9</sup>John Macquarrie, "A Theology of Alienation" in Alienation: Concept, Term and Meanings, p. 315.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Juan Bruce-Novoa, "Interview with Jose Antonio Villarreal," Revista Chicano Riquena, 4, No. 2 (Primavera 1976), 40.

<sup>12</sup>William Hogan, rev. of Pocho by Jose Antonio Villarreal, San Francisco Chronicle (1959), p. 41.

<sup>13</sup>John Bright, rev. of Pocho, Nation (Ja. 9, 1960), p. 36.

<sup>14</sup>Rev. of Pocho, Booklist (Ja. 1, 1960), p. 267.

<sup>15</sup>Rev. of Pocho, Kirkus (Aug. 1, 1959), p. 568.

<sup>16</sup>Rev. of Pocho, Library Journal (Nov. 15, 1959), p. 3587.

<sup>17</sup>Philip D. Ortego, "Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature," Diss. University of New Mexico, 1971, p. 208, 233.

<sup>18</sup>Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, "On The Meaning of Pocho" in Jose Antonio Villarreal, Pocho (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1970), p. xi.

<sup>19</sup>Helena Monahan, "The Chicano Novel: Toward a Definition and Literary Criticism," Diss. St. Louis University, 1972, p. 48, 46.

<sup>20</sup>Rafael Francisco Grajeda, "The Figure of The Pocho in Contemporary Chicano Fiction," Diss. University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1974, p. 89, 53.

<sup>21</sup>Monahan, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup>Grajeda, p. 32-33.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>24</sup>Monahan, p. 46.

<sup>25</sup>Ruiz, "On The Meaning of Pocho," p. viii.

<sup>26</sup>Charles P. Loomis, "A Backward Glance at Self-Identification of Blacks and Chicanos," Rural Sociology, 39, No. 1 (Spring 1974), 96.

<sup>27</sup>Jose Antonio Villarreal, Pocho (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970), p. 31. All subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>28</sup>Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961), p. 16-17.

<sup>29</sup>Rev. of Chicano by Richard Vasquez, The Booklist, 66 (Ap. 15, 1970), 1022.

<sup>30</sup>Judson LaHaye, rev. of Chicano, Bestseller (March 1, 1970), p. 451.

<sup>31</sup>Rev. of Chicano, New York Times Book Review (March 22, 1970), p. 41.

<sup>32</sup>Arthur J. Rubel, rev. of Chicano, International Migration Review, 6 (Spring 1972), 88-89.

<sup>33</sup>Rev. of Chicano, Choice, 7, 4 (June 1970), p. 546.

<sup>34</sup>Rev. of Chicano, Library Journal (Ja. 15, 1970), p. 177.

<sup>35</sup>Judson LaHaye, Rev. of Chicano, p. 451.

<sup>36</sup>Arthur J. Rubel, Rev. of Chicano, p. 89.

<sup>37</sup>Herminio Rios C., Rev. of Chicano, El Grito, 3, No. 3 (Spring 1970), 70.

<sup>38</sup>Francine Ginsberg, Rev. of Chicano, Entrelíneas, 4, No. 1-2 (Primavera-Verano 1975), 10.

<sup>39</sup>Grajeda, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Vasquez, Chicano. (New York: Avon Books, 1970), p. 53. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

### CHAPTER III

DISCOVERY, REDISCOVERY AND SYNTHESIS: THE PROCESS  
OF SELF DISCOVERY IN TOMAS RIVERA'S Y NO SE LO  
TRAGO LA TIERRA/AND THE EARTH DID NOT PART

Unlike the existential idea that the discovery of the self is a tragic experience and involves a continual coming to terms with the en-soi, in Rivera this discovery of the self leads to an assertion of life and to man's making peace with himself, with society and with nature. This is the first step toward self-reliance, and while there remains an awareness of death, the prime concern is a positive emphasis on life.<sup>1</sup>

With the 1971 publication of Tomas Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And The Earth Did Not Part, Chicano prose fiction began to emerge as a literature whose vision involved a stark confrontation with the debilitating vision of alienation presented by Villarreal and Vasquez. Through its portrayal of confronting alienation and the disorder of being which is its by-product, Rivera's work began to lay the groundwork for a genuine coming-to-terms with the self in Mexican American fiction. As Villarreal and Vasquez had done before him, Rivera clearly acknowledges the hostile social environment in which the Chicano has been forced to exist. Unlike the two earlier writers, however, Rivera



focuses upon the confrontation with the hostile environment as a critical step in the liberation from the chains of alienation and disorder. Only by confronting disorder, Rivera's work illustrates, can the individual muster the courage to become the master of it, to be free of it and, finally, to know who one is in the process. As Frank Pino has suggested above, Rivera's vision of self-knowledge dispels alienation and brings order and harmony because the individual has made peace with himself, the environment and with society. In knowing who one is, Rivera says, the processes that make up this experience we call "life" become affirmative ones, not because they are free from suffering but because the individual is the master and not the slave of life's processes.

Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra was highly praised in Chicano critical circles. William H. Gonzales in a review in Modern Language Journal refers to it as "a summary of the past, a living present, and a base for the future of Chicano literature."<sup>2</sup> Gonzales echoes Herminio Rios' praise, contained in Rios' introduction to the work where he terms Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra "a landmark in the present, and a point of departure into the future of our literary tradition."<sup>3</sup>

Rafael Grajeda has carried forth the claim that Rivera's work is a landmark piece of prose fiction when he calls it a genuine "literature of liberation" and claims that the work signals the true beginnings of the Chicano

Renaissance. Grajeda treats only three writers--Villarreal, Vasquez and Rivera--and claims that Rivera alone among the three renders an authentic account of the Chicano experience. The basis for Grajeda's assertion rests upon his view that unlike Villarreal's and Vasquez's characters, Rivera's narrator/hero embraces the totality of his experiences as a Chicano--the persons, lifestyle, customs and rituals that characterize his Mexican Americanness. Unlike Richard Rubio who escapes his Mexican environment or the various Chicano characters in Chicano who embrace materialistic American values, Rivera's youthful narrator/hero comes to embrace what Grajeda terms "not a personal but a social identity"--he comes to acknowledge a "re-identification with that which is his own, i.e., with himself as a member of a people."<sup>4</sup> This forging of an identity based on a recognition of the worth and merit of one's life's experiences as a member of a cultural group signals for Grajeda a truly worthwhile and authentic rendering of the Chicano experience.

The extent to which Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra is a departure from Pocho and Chicano can be described, in part at least, according to Grajeda's interpretation of Rivera's positive attitude toward the worth of the cultural group's values and beliefs. In terms of the overall effect of the work, its chronological place in the thematic development of Chicano prose fiction and its relationship to the fiction which has followed it, however, we can more correctly

determine that Rivera gave expression to the idea of confronting the alienation that had for too long plagued the Chicano character. This effect coupled with the technical excellence of the work accounts for the great impact it continues to have on Mexican American literature. Rivera's work represents a stage of maturity, both psychological and literary, that reveals a vision attained only after a prolonged period of suffering and confusion have come to pass. We may correctly assign Pocho and Chicano to this period of confusion and alienation. Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra, on the other hand, begins the period of confrontation, discovery and self-definition in Chicano fiction.

The work is composed of twelve narratives set in the decade of the 1950's. Each selection is preceded by a short anecdote which reflects, questions, enhances or comments upon the narrative that follows it. In addition, a prologue opens the work and introduces the young protagonist, the "I" of all except one narrative told from the first person point of view. An epilogue serves to recapitulate and synthesize the meaning the events in the twelve narratives has had for the young boy. Interspersed throughout the narratives is an exchange in points of view between the narrator/protagonist, the objective narrator and the author/narrator who figures largely in the "Under the House" epilogue.

As Herminio Rios C. points out in the introduction, the structure of the work parallels the twelve months in the year and represents the characteristic sequence of events in

the lives of Texas migrant farm workers. Marcienne Rocard observes in "The Cycle of Chicano Experience in '...and the Earth did not part'" that the settings of the narratives correspond to the seasonal changes in the year, with the first story opening in April in Texas, the middle stories taking place during the northern summer beet harvest and the last several narratives taking place near or at the end of the year.<sup>5</sup> The year long events that transpire in the work together become the basis for the nameless narrator/hero's confrontation with alienation and his leaving behind childhood limitations and fears to enter the mature, comprehending world of the adult who has acquired self-knowledge.

In the prologue--"El Ano Perdido/The Lost Year"--we meet the confused, alienated child trying to make sense of the year long events surrounding him, yet unable to distinguish between dream and reality. The dreaming quality of the setting serves to characterize the boy's confusion as he hears a voice calling him. Upon turning around to face the caller and finding he has made a complete turn, however, the boy finds no caller. He becomes afraid when he discovers, finally, that the voice has been his own, that a fragmented part of himself is in search of another separated part. He begins thereafter to refer to the period of confusion as el ano perdido.

Recognizing the importance of this first glimpse of the fragmented self and of the boy's state of alienation is critical to a full understanding of the discovery of the

self via the psychological synthesis of the year's events which comes at the end of the work. Frank Pino in "The Outsider and 'El Otro' in Tomas Rivera's 'Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra'" has called the protagonist an "outsider," an archetype which "has come to symbolize the Mexican-American experience." The boy is thus an outsider in the sense that he along with his people are not socially and spiritually a part of the country in which they live. More importantly, however, is Pino's suggestion that the boy is an outsider in the sense that he alone throughout the course of the year's experiences of suffering, humiliation and tragedy seeks a larger meaning to what he has seen pass before him. As the boy seeks to understand and relate one experience with another "the world of adult experience and of intellectual and moral awareness is beginning to open. As he passes into this world...he continues to remain an outsider,...He begins a process of self-realization which separates him from the rest of society."<sup>6</sup>

The boy's journey toward self-realization, however, is paradoxical as Pino also suggests. For the boy discovers "el otro"--the other which is his mature self--in part through an identification with his people: "...Rivera's young protagonist views those around him sympathetically. By so doing the youth's 'I' expands, ceasing to be solitary and becoming collective...."<sup>7</sup> Before this identification with el pueblo--the community--is realized, Rivera's protagonist must first undergo a solitary journey to discover

where his personal beliefs lie, to go deep within himself to find self-knowledge.

The beginning of el ano perdido is marked by tragedy. As the Texas migrants labor in the fields under an unusually hot April sun, the children become thirsty, yet they fear the anger of the boss who has forbade them to stop working to drink from the cattle's water tank. While the boss is away, one child can contain his thirst no longer. As he sneaks a drink, however, the boss aims a rifle near him and shoots, intending only to surprise and scare him. Instead, the shot finds the child's head as its target. The effect of Rivera's simple description of the incident reinforces the tragedy: "He [the child] didn't even jump like the deer; he just fell into the water like a dirty rag and the water became saturated with blood...."<sup>8</sup> The conversation between the two campesinos [peasants] regarding the boss' alleged insanity and suicide attempt following the death which ends the narrative heightens the tragedy in the sense that Rocard refers to it as a "moving simplicity of style" which "is expressive of the painful, humble condition of a people reduced to an inferior position in Anglo-American society, of their exploitation at the hands of the bosses, of all kinds of discrimination they and their children have to face, lastly of the way they meet their situation."<sup>9</sup>

The second narrative, "A Prayer," is told from the first person point of view of a suppliant mother who prays for the safe return of her son from the Korean War. The

language is tender and pleading: "Protect his heart with your hands. Jesus, Holy Father, Virgin de Guadalupe, give me back his life, bring me back his heart...if you want blood tear it from me" (p. 19). The emotional religiosity which is the highpoint of this narrative is sustained in several later narratives, and it serves as an introduction to Rivera's long-suffering, essentially hopeful and faithful women characters. Not until the crucial and climactic fifth and sixth narratives does the fervor with which the prayer is recited contrast with the protagonist's bold questioning and final denial of God.

With the third narrative, "It is Painful," we return to the protagonist's first person account of his experience of being ridiculed by classmates in a northern school and of his subsequent expulsion from the school by the principal for supposedly initiating a fight with another boy. Unable to comprehend the reality of the situation which he knows will greatly displease his parents, the boy questions whether or not he has really been expelled from the school. His longing for the experience to be something he has only imagined is the result of his wish not to disappoint his parents who would rather he be in school than working in the fields:

What am I going to tell them? Maybe they didn't expel me. Sure, man, sure they did. What if they didn't? Sure they did. (p. 32)

What I regret most is that now I will not be able to be a telephone operator as my father wants me to be. You need to finish school for that. (p. 34)

The boy's experience of being sent to the school nurse to be rid of lice and of the taunting words of the Anglo boy who sneers "Hey Mex...I don't like Mexicans because they steal. You hear me?" (p. 32) serve as examples of the humiliation the boy undergoes and which accounts for his wanting to run away, back to the trees and chicken coops where "one at least feels free, more at ease" (p. 30). He reveals that he is simply told by the principal "to go away" (p. 33). The insensitivity and prejudice of northern schools toward migrant children is expressed by the principal who feels no qualms about dismissing the boy since his parents "could care less if I expel him...they need him in the fields" (p. 33). Ironically, on his way home the boy finds solace in the beauty of the quiet, well kept northern cemetery. Its beauty is the cause, he reasons, "why people here don't even cry when they bury someone" (p. 33).

The narrative ends with the boy's mounting fears, as he nears home, of what he will tell his parents. He continues, poignantly, to question the reality of his expulsion from school. The final effect of the narrative is undoubtedly the injustice of the situation and the insensitivity of public institutions toward the poor migrant children. Although the boy passively accepts the injustice done him on this occasion, it is only the beginning of a series of injustices



he experiences during el ano perdido that will cause him to revolt. His fear and humiliation are the overriding emotions in the story; he expresses the same sort of naive fearfulness of incomprehensible situations as do the campesinos in the anecdote preceding the narrative who fear going north to Utah, an unknown place they fear does not exist-- "we've never been there ourselves, but they say it's close to Japan" (unnumbered page).

The anecdote preceding the fourth narrative involves a conversation between the young hero and a hardened, cynical older person who discounts schooling as a way of preparing for future opportunities because "the downtrodden will always be downtrodden" (unnumbered page). This pessimistic remark leads into the narrative, again told from the protagonist's first person point of view. The narrative recounts a frightening episode the boy experiences because his parents have left him up north for three weeks to finish the school year. The boy's guardians are don Laito and doña Boni who appear on the surface to be kindly old people who give food and clothing to the migrants in the fields. The boy relates his discovery that they are in fact thieves and murderers. Though kindly to the boy in the beginning, they soon force him to perform much hard work and even attempt to get him to steal for them. He is forced, in addition, to sleep in a musty, dark and cluttered room and made the butt of their practical jokes. The final act of cruelty inflicted upon the boy is their forcing him to dig the grave for

the rich mojado [wetback] they have murdered. As a final practical joke, they place the corpse on the boy's bed one night and directly after dinner command him to go to bed. As he comes away from the bed stained with the dead man's blood, the boy feels the guilt of an accomplice. To prevent his telling anyone of their act, the couple force him to wear the dead man's ring. Though the boy is at last taken back home, the effect of the experience stays with him. He tells of developing the habit of putting his hand in his pocket to hide his identification with the dead mojado. Though he tries to throw the ring away, he cannot bring himself to for he fears someone will find it and discover his guilt.

The boy's experience of guilt, though obviously undeserved, is the primary focus of the incident. His fear, innocence and naivete emerge as the causes of his victimization by the old people. He becomes fear's victim, held tightly by feelings of guilt which come to rule his waking hours.

A dramatic turnaround occurs, however, in the succeeding two narratives. Structurally, they occupy the center of the work, and they function as the turning point in the boy's journey toward self-knowledge. The anecdote introducing "It Was A Silvery Night" sets the stage for the protagonist's maturing insight into the conditions of his existence. It recounts the boy's attempt to get a haircut before going to the movies and the two barbers' refusal to attend

to him. When they also forbid him to wait around their shop for the movie to begin, the boy begins to understand the workings of prejudice. His first experience of understanding is presented here when the anecdote ends with the description: "Everything was then perfectly clear, and he went home to get his father" (unnumbered page).

The time sequence of the work has by the fifth narrative progressed to summertime--the setting for "It Was A Silvery Night." The boy's initiation into maturity begins on a warm summer night when he decides he will summon the devil. His reason for doing so is to discover whether or not the devil exists. His courage in attempting this forbidden act is highlighted by the conversation between two older men who discuss what happens to those foolish enough to invoke the devil: "There have been many who have summoned him and they've later regretted it. Most of them have been on the verge of going insane...No, you can't fool around with the devil. If you do, you've already sold out your soul. There are some who die of fright; there are others who are overcome with sadness and eventually stop talking altogether, as if the soul had left their bodies" (p. 61).

The peacefulness and beauty of the silvery moon allay the boy's fears as he goes out at midnight to engage the devil. His eagerness to discover once and for all whether or not the devil exists leads him, by extension, to decide that if Satan does not exist then God must not exist either.

Although he fears the import of this discovery and the punishment he could receive for even conceiving the thought, he calls out to Satan. Upon receiving no answer, he begins to curse the devil but no response comes. Feeling disillusioned yet brave, the boy concludes "The devil did not exist" (p. 62). Though still fearful of doubting God's existence, he continues to ponder the meaning of this experience. Before drifting off to sleep he experiences a stroke of insight: "Suddenly everything was clear. Those who summoned the devil and later went insane did not do so because they had seen the devil. On the contrary, it was because the devil had not appeared" (p. 63). The effect of the devil's non-appearance is the crucial impetus for the boy's initiation into the most forbidden of thoughts--the questioning of God's existence. He confronts the non-appearance, the nothingness not with the insanity of one who cannot tolerate even the possibility of the devil's and God's non-existence but with a certain sober curiosity. Yet, his final release from doubt does not occur until he is forced to confront the misery of his family's and his people's existence in the sixth narrative.

The overwhelming oppressiveness of the terrifically hot sun plays a central role in the youth's final confrontation with God in the title story "And the Earth did not part." Raymond Barrio's effective treatment in The Plum Plum Pickers of the love-hate relationship between the farm laborer who toils beneath the sun's life giving rays only to find

that it is quickly transferred into a fierce oppressor is reiterated by Rivera in this pivotal narrative. Marcienne Rocard has, in addition, pointed to the earth as a life giving element which also becomes a type of enemy to the farm laborer: "The field workers are caught between the sun and the earth, the dual symbol of their exploitation. They are 'feeding the earth and the sun' <sup>(14)</sup> 'half buried in the earth like animals without any hope' <sup>(15)</sup> under the sun that 'can suck the life out of you.'" <sup>(16)</sup> <sup>10</sup>

The protagonist in this sixth narrative is, from the beginning, full of hate and anger at the senseless suffering his people are forced to undergo working in the fields. "He had become angry because he couldn't strike back at anyone" (p. 74). His mother's tears and fervent prayers to God for his father's recovery from sunstroke serve only to infuriate the boy because as he says "God doesn't even remember us... God, I am sure, doesn't give a damn about us" (p. 75-76).

The injustices and suffering God allows to befall poor people make no sense to the angry boy. He tells his mother he is tired of asking why his family must be God's victims. Ever hopeful, his mother speaks of trusting God's will and of the peacefulness attained only through death. In addition, she warns her son of the consequences of reviling against God: "Don't question the will of God. The ground might open up and devour you for talking like that" (p. 76).

With his father recovering, the young man becomes responsible for the well being of his younger brothers and

sisters as they continue to work under the relentless sun: "By three o'clock they were already sopping wet with sweat. Not a single part of their clothing remained dry. Every few minutes they stopped. Then everything became blurred and the fear of sunstroke crept into them but they continued" (p. 77). At last, the smallest boy falls ill. The already embittered young man, as he carries his younger brother home, can no longer tolerate the irrationality of their victimization. Out of fury and despair, he curses God and at first experiences the old fears of his parents. His fear turns to courage, however, when the earth does not open up to devour him as he had been told by his mother. His cursing of God brings him, he discovers, a peace of mind he had not before realized. As he ponders his defiant act in the cool of the morning of the following day "for the first time he felt himself capable of doing and undoing whatever he chose" (p. 79).

At this critical point, Rivera's protagonist attains a deeper understanding of his place in the world. His discovery of freedom hinges on his breaking with the tradition-bound thought of his parents--his cursing of God, "the apex of the universe." When the boy speaks of discovering that he was capable of doing and undoing what he chose, he imposes an order upon the chaos of his previous existence. He imposes this order when he realizes that "he has conquered his absurd world by gaining complete rational control of it.

He, too, may rejoice because he has through mental freedom broken out of the cycle of misery."<sup>11</sup>

The voice we hear narrating the seventh narrative-- "First Holy Communion"-- is that of the older, wiser youth looking back upon a significant event in his early life which caused him to ponder previously held beliefs. The youth's encounter with the meaning of sexuality and its relationship to the mysteries of sin and the sacrament of penance point to an early link in the chain of his growth from innocence and confusion to understanding and maturity. As a naive participant in the religious ritual of confession, the child accepts, out of fear, his position as a sinner, bound to confess his unworthiness before he dare approach the communion table for the first time. Driven by the perverted scrupulosity of the nun who verses the class in preparing for confession by concentrating on the various sins of the flesh, the boy admits to not understanding the entire process into which he is to become initiated. His fear is centered on the physical torture of hell which surrounds him in the form of a picture placed by his mother at the head of his bed. His only real understanding of the relationship of sin to hell is based on his fear that if he does not confess the exact number of transgressions (as the nun has insisted he must), he is sure to commit a sacrilege, for which he would surely be sent to hell. It is only the threat of hell and not of what constitutes "sinning" that is clear in the boy's understanding: "The thing that

frightened me most was the idea of hell because a few months earlier I had fallen into a tub full of coals that we used as a heater in the small room where we slept. I burned my calf. I could well imagine what it would be like to be in hell forever. That was the only thing I understood" (p.89).

Driven by the fear of not being able to remember each of the two hundred sins he decides he will confess, the boy arrives at the church at daybreak on the morning of his first communion to give himself adequate time to rehearse telling his sins. He finds the church locked and not many people stirring. On his way to search out the priest, the boy passes the nearby tailor shop where he hears and sees a man and woman lying on the floor engaged in sexual intercourse. Though he runs away frightened and convinced that what he has witnessed are "the sins of the flesh," he is torn between being convinced of his sinfulness for having witnessed the sex act and of wanting to go back to confirm what he has seen. His feeling of guilt is so great he even begins to feel unworthy of going to confession. He fears disappointing his parents and his godfather, however, and decides to go through the confession without admitting that he has "committed" a sin of the flesh.

Following his first encounter with sexuality and the first communion service, the boy finds that "everything seemed different; it seemed as though I was at the same place, but yet somehow not the same place. Everything seemed smaller and less significant" (p. 91). He can not



bring himself to enjoy the festivities that have been planned in his honor because he realizes that the mystery of the sins of the flesh have been made known to him. While alone, he begins to unravel the day's events and finds that he takes pleasure in recalling the scene at the tailor shop. His religious scrupulosity begins to take second place to his newfound knowledge of the sins of the flesh as he recalls that he even forgot he had lied to the priest. The final impact of his first encounter with sexuality is, however, soon put into perspective. Its mystery seems to fade even as the boy decides that perhaps, though he had thought otherwise, after all "everything was the same" (p. 91).

This narrative ends the trilogy of stories that occupy the core of Rivera's work. All three provide a religious backdrop against which the narrator/protagonist comes to discover an aspect of life which had heretofore remained mysterious. Perhaps the central discovery he makes is that his fear of the supernatural, his fear of God has made him merely a passive observer in the events of his life and that of his family. Release from this fear provides the boy with a new impetus to become the master of his destiny. Rivera's emphasis upon liberation from a restrictive, traditional religious view of the world provides, in addition, the basis for the freedom other characters in later Chicano fiction experience, notably Antonio Marez in Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Narratives eight through eleven--"Little Children Burned," "The Night of the Blackout," "Christmas Eve," and "The Portrait"--may be examined as a group because all provide examples of archetypical situations and characters in the Chicano experience. Migrant children left unattended are burned to death because the boss will not allow them in the fields with their parents provides the basis for the pathos in "Little Children Burned." Rivera very effectively describes the solicitous concern both parents have for the children and the fears they express about leaving them alone. The demands of physical existence, however, take precedence and the children are left to care for and entertain themselves. The prominent theme emerging from the narrative is the need for life to continue though there seems to be no justice, nor reason for the children's deaths. The conversation between the two campesinos at the end of the narrative points directly to the simplicity of their acceptance of tragedy: "'And the Garcias, how are they taking it?' 'They're getting over their tragedy, but I doubt if they will ever forget it. What else can one do? You never know when death will come, nor in what manner. What a tragedy. But one never knows.' 'I guess not'" (p. 102).

The description of a festive wedding celebration in the anecdote preceding "The Night of the Blackout" acts as a contrast to the death occurring in this ninth story. The intensity yet simplicity of passion that is a very characteristic part of Rivera's campesinos' lives is nowhere more

clearly evident than in this sketch of unfulfilled love. Ramon's love for the flirtatious and inconstant Juanita drives him, once his pride has been attacked and he has been betrayed, to ruin the occasion of her public display of casting him off. When Juanita refuses to dance only with him at the Saturday night fiesta, Ramon decides to put a stop to the party. The "blackout" that occurs that night refers not only to the lights going out at the dance and the entire city but to Ramon's life as well: "The workers from the electric company found Ramon inside the electric plant that was about a block away from the hall. They say he was burned to a crisp and he was holding on to one of the transformers....'They were very much in love, wouldn't you say?' 'Yes of course'" (p. 116). The effectiveness with which Rivera allows his characters to inject their views of tragic situations that befall them is again evident here as tragedy, to the campesinos, is accepted as closely intertwined even with love. A certain stoic acceptance of tragedy is, Rivera shows, their only recourse.

Rivera returns again in "Christmas Eve" to his women characters. His portrayal of doña Maria, the narrator/protagonist's mother, is filled with the understanding of an insider who appreciates what the outside world cannot. Doña Maria occupies an important and nurturing role in the youth's family as she attempts to please her children on Christmas Eve with store-bought gifts instead of the simple fruits and nuts they are accustomed to receiving as their

only presents. In order to do this, however, she must face the congestion and challenge of a trip downtown--something she has done only once in her lifetime.

Doña Maria's life does not extend to participation in the routine of what is everyday life to the city's people. Protected by her husband and unable to take part in the bustle of city life, doña Maria is the portrait of the dependent, insecure woman whose life centers on her simple existence as a campesino wife and mother.

Such is the background against which we must see doña Maria's brave decision to venture downtown so that on this Christmas her children can have the type of gifts other children have, the type they have persistently asked for this year. Her trip, however, proves a mistake. Her fears and insecurities overtake her once inside the Kress store; the noises and crowds confuse her and without thinking she quickly stuffs small items in her bag and rushes outside, wanting only to reach home safely. Before she can get home, however, she is stopped by store officials to be charged and jailed for shoplifting.

Though her husband later tells doña Maria he will explain to the children that there is no Santa Claus to prevent them bothering her about gifts again, he, with her coaxing, decides against it. They will tell the children to wait until the day of the Epiphany--the traditional Mexican day for receiving gifts--and perhaps they will receive presents. Their decision rests upon the idea that "...it's

always better to have hope" (p. 133). The day of the Reyes Magos [the Three Kings] arrives; the children are again disappointed. In spite of their disappointment, however, the children ask no questions. As one critic has pointed out,<sup>12</sup> this acceptance of dashed hopes characterizes the campesino's response to the disappointment which is so much a part of his life.

"The Portrait" continues the theme of the simplicity and naivete with which the campesino approaches life. In this eleventh narrative, however, the desire to rectify wrongdoing leads one campesino to acquire an amount of restitution. "The Portrait" is the only narrative in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra that touches the realm of the humorous. As such it acts as a reminder that though life for the campesino is certainly not largely comical, it does have its light moments.

The portrait salesmen who like vultures await the arrival of the people from up north when they have just received their wages descend upon don Mateo and his wife. In their desire to preserve the memory of their dead son in what the salesman promises will be a beautiful wood-inlaid, three-dimensional portrait, don Mateo and his wife turn over their only photograph. Many other neighborhood families also decide to pay the thirty dollars which the salesman demands on the spot for the portrait.

When no portraits arrive after a long period of time, and the children one day discover a sack full of wet

pictures lying in a ditch, a determined don Mateo sets out to San Antonio to find the crook. The trip is well worth the trouble, for don Mateo returns with a portrait he has forced the salesman to paint from memory.

Though don Mateo is vindicated and the portrait occupies a place of honor close to the Virgin de Guadalupe's picture, the neighbors agree that Chuy, the son, was beginning to resemble his father more and more. Don Mateo himself sums up the humor found in the narrative: "Yes. I think so. That's what everyone tells me now. That Chuy resembled me more and more, and that he was beginning to look like me. There's the portrait. One might say we're one and the same" (p. 145).

The twelfth and last narrative, "When We Arrive," is a story of futile dreams and dashed hopes for a better life. It is a poignant ending to the glimpse of Rivera's campesinos' lives we have had up to this point. In the narrative, we hear the thoughts of many different persons as they ponder how they will improve their lives once they have arrived up north and made some money. They travel like cattle in a van, and some are forced to stand up the entire trip to Des Moines. Some express bitterness at their poverty and at their exploitation by others: "'This goddamn son-of-a-bitch's life. This is the last time I travel like a goddamn animal standing up all the way. Just as soon as we arrive I'm going to Minneapolis, surely I'll find something

to do there where I don't have to work like a goddamn animal...One of these days I'll screw 'em all'" (p. 159).

Others, on the other hand, hope only that there will be work, that the children will be able to go to school and that there will be enough money to buy an ailing wife a good bed. The irony Rivera reveals in this last segment lies in the arrival that is not an arrival at all but a continuation into "the nightmarish round of years"<sup>13</sup> that is the farm worker's life. It is the voice of the protagonist we hear expressing the hopelessness of their circular movement in the ring of poverty: "I'm tired of always arriving. Maybe I should say when we don't arrive because that's the plain truth. We never really arrive anywhere" (p. 160).

The anecdote introducing the epilogue sets the time sequence of the work in order as Bartolo, the town poet, makes his way into the city during December when most people have arrived back in the pueblo [town]. His poems recapture the meaning of the random events which have constituted a year in the lives of the campesinos. His function as artist, as one whose vision assimilates the campesinos' lives into artistic order, parallels the narrator/protagonist's and the narrator/author's function as the "voice" we hear in the epilogue. Bartolo's poems, the protagonist's experience of self-knowledge along with his concomitant vision of self-hood and order, and Rivera's work in which both function emerge as "the love seed in the dark" (unnumbered page).

In the epilogue, "Under The House," Rivera's protagonist has retreated from the outside world in order to think through the events that have constituted el ano perdido. In the quiet of the darkness beneath the house, the jumble of events, of people and of conversations float randomly through the boy's mind as though pieces of a puzzle that belong in a pattern. The tragic deaths of the boy at the water tank and of the children who burned to death while their parents worked in the fields pass through his mind as do the frightening days spent with don Laito and doña Boni. He recalls the barber who refused to cut his hair, the boy who struck him in the northern school and his discovery that "there is no devil, there isn't" (p. 174). As Marcienne Rocard observes, the voice of Rivera the author/narrator gradually takes up the role as the center of consciousness in the epilogue. One can also suggest that the youth under the house and Rivera the artist merge as one voice, each fitting the pieces of the puzzle--the lost year--into a comprehensible whole: a regained year for the boy, a work of art for Rivera.<sup>14</sup> The youth's experience of selfhood and of order is enlarged when he discovers that he has indeed imposed a pattern to the jumbled events of the year and that it represents his intimate ties and identification with the pueblo.

While in the darkness of his retreat, the boy discovers that he has much to think about and "many years to catch up on" (p. 176). As he emerges from under the house, he is



happy in his discovery that at last he knows how to fit the pieces of the years into the puzzle that is himself: "He had discovered something. To discover and to rediscover and synthesize. To relate this entity with that entity and that entity with still another, and finally relating everything with everything else. That was what he had to do, that was all" (p. 177). The peacefulness of order descends upon the boy as he climbs the tree in his back yard, and Rivera allows us to see that the youth has indeed discovered himself when the boy imagines "someone" sitting atop a distant palm tree waving at him. The closing image is of the boy waving back in acknowledgment of that "someone" who is, at last, himself.<sup>15</sup>

When in the middle of the work Rivera's hero curses God's injustice, this act symbolizes the confrontation of alienation that occurs in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra, and thus separates it from Pocho and Chicano. The narrator/hero in Rivera's work refuses to escape his misery as does Richard Rubio, and he does not submit to it as do Sammy and Mariana Sandoval. During the course of the narrative, Rivera's hero progresses toward an understanding of confrontation as the only way he can begin to exercise some mental control over his life. The structure of the work mirrors the boy's developing understanding. In the first four narratives, the boy is as confused and alienated as are his parents and all the other campesinos. In the climactic fifth and sixth narratives, the boy questions the cultural

tradition's blind acceptance of an unjust God; in his blasphemous questioning, the boy exercises a mental freedom that allows him to transcend the misery of his alienation. The remaining narratives show the boy's participation in the community's life though he understands it as the others do not, trapped as they are by their suffering. The epilogue, "Under the House," expresses the boy's integration of the year's events and is the conclusion of the earlier fifth and sixth narratives. El ano perdido, the lost year, is found; the boy regains it when he transcends the suffering it has brought and identifies with the people whose life it has been as much as his.

The resolution offered in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra involves the recognition of mental freedom. The boy finds strength to go on with life because he has discovered a self that is free to curse the absurdity of a God, supposedly good, who allows people a lifetime of suffering. In presenting resolution, Rivera's work goes beyond simply mirroring alienation that we find in Pocho and Chicano. Additionally, Rivera's work signals the beginning of a concern in Chicano fiction with portraying the Chicano's initiation into his cultural past. Rivera's protagonist emerges from the year long events with a mature love for his people, and he is initiated into brotherhood with them. This initiation into the shared, traditional past becomes the key element in the novels of Rudolfo Anaya which are the concern of the next chapter.

## Notes to Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>Frank Pino, "The Outsider and 'El Otro' in Rivera's '...Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra," Books Abroad, 49, 458.

<sup>2</sup>William H. Gonzales, rev. of Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra by Tomas Rivera, Modern Language Journal, 57 (April 1973), 229.

<sup>3</sup>Herminio Rios C., in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And The Earth Did Not Part (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971), p. xv.

<sup>4</sup>Rafael Francisco Grajeda, "The Figure of The Pocho in Contemporary Chicano Fiction," Diss. University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1974, p. 89, 90, 95, 118.

<sup>5</sup>Marcienne Rocard, "The Cycle of Chicano Experience in '...and the earth did not part' by Tomas Rivera," Caliban, 10, 143.

<sup>6</sup>Frank Pino, "The Outsider and 'El Otro' ..." p. 453, 456.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 457.

<sup>8</sup>Tomas Rivera, Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And The Earth Did Not Part (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971), p. II. All subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup>Rocard, "The Cycle of Chicano Experience," p. 144.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 148, 150.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 150, 148.

<sup>15</sup>Pino, "The Outsider and 'El Otro' ...," p. 457.

## CHAPTER IV

### JOURNEY TOWARD INTEGRATION: THE INITIATION MOTIF IN BLESS ME, ULTIMA AND HEART OF AZTLAN

'I will be saddened at leaving you,' I told Ultima when we were alone. 'Ay,' she tried to smile, 'life is filled with sadness when a boy grows to be a man. But as you grow into manhood you must not despair of life, but gather strength to sustain you--can you understand that.' 'Yes,' I said, and she smiled.<sup>1</sup>

The initiation motif in American literature has long given expression to the American experience of a loss of innocence. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn stands as perhaps the foremost representative of American initiation literature, of a literature concerned with portraying the traumatic passage from childhood to adulthood.

In initiation literature, the childhood world of idealism collapses under the weight of the real world, replete with sham, injustice and disorder. Though Huck Finn has by no means led an innocent, comfortable or secure existence before he embarks on his journey down the Mississippi with Mrs. Watson's Jim, he does during the course of his travels, lose the innocence and freedom of his devil-may-care lifestyle. During his adventures, Huck is witness to the

pretense and pettiness of the society the Widow Douglas would have him embrace. Huck is left at the novel's end, as are protagonists in later initiation literature, to decide how he will come to grips with his newfound insights about society. His decision to light out for the western territory before Aunt Sally can adopt and civilize him signals his turning away from the starch-collared, Sunday school pretense of the society he has left behind. In so doing, Huck attempts to salvage the remnants of his original freedom. Though he cannot, after his encounter with adult society, return to the likes of Tom Sawyer's innocent, make-believe adventures, Huck in the end retains his freedom from "civilization."

Freedom from the constraints and demands imposed by a modern twentieth-century society becomes the modern protagonist's quest in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. Though the setting, the language, the tone and the overall frame of consciousness is quite different from Huckleberry Finn, The Bell Jar shares with the earlier work a thematic concern with portraying the loss of innocence. Upon leaving the protective world of her childhood, Esther Greenwood encounters a sophisticated adult world in New York City. The overwhelming impact of this society, coupled with her own personal insecurities and anxieties regarding her ability to function in the society, throws Esther into a state of mental breakdown. Her slow path to recovery involves a coming to terms with the society which presses in and keeps her

enclosed, a prisoner in a suffocating bell jar. Plath's protagonist manages, to a degree, to come to terms with the demands of the adult world, but the principal impact of the novel lies, as does Twain's, in Plath's presentation of that world's hypocrisy and insensitivity. As a story of initiation, The Bell Jar captures the sense of alienation and trauma which is so intimately connected with the passage from childhood and innocence to adulthood and maturity. The popularity of this theme in modern literature is clearly recognizable when we consider that it is the concern of such works as Crane's The Red Badge of Courage, Dreiser's Sister Carrie, Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, Joyce's Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man, Hemingway's In Our Time and The Nick Adams Stories and Faulkner's The Unvanquished and Intruder in the Dust.

Rudolfo Anaya has made extensive use of the initiation motif in both Bless Me, Ultima and Heart of Aztlan, and he has, in addition, added another dimension to it by placing it within the context of the Mexican American cultural tradition. Anaya's protagonists are confronted with various facets of the cultural tradition--mythic, religious and social--and are initiated into the spiritual powers residing within the heritage. Once Anaya's characters have faced squarely their identification with the cultural heritage, they begin to find the means to come to terms with themselves as individuals. They find the means to establish personal identities only after recognizing their intimate

ties with the cultural tradition. In Anaya's world, the road toward authentic selfhood involves being confronted with and initiated into the mysteries of the Chicano cultural heritage. Unlike the world presented in either Twain's or Plath's novels, the atmosphere into which Anaya's protagonists enter is essentially a good and nurturing one.

### BLESS ME, ULTIMA

First published in 1972, Bless Me, Ultima immediately met with much critical acclaim. It was awarded the Second Annual Premio Quinto Sol literary Award and, in addition, received several very favorable reviews in Library Journal, Publishers Weekly, Booklist, America and Revista Chicano-Riqueña. Without exception, the reviews pointed to Anaya's skillful and sensitive treatment of Antonio Marez's spiritual growth into self awareness. One reviewer writing in Publishers Weekly pointed out that "The book has suspense, humor, epic struggles symbolizing the struggles of good against evil--just about all the qualities necessary to a riveting story."<sup>2</sup> The feature most commonly commented upon in the reviews, moreover, is Anaya's sensitive concern with presenting the quiet dignity and resourcefulness of the Mexican American cultural tradition. Anaya's grasp of the features that make up this heritage along with his technical literary skills in presenting them become important elements in Scott Wood's critique of the novel: "...he [Anaya] develops a complexity of natural symbols and mythic

anecdotes in a simple lyric style which becomes, finally, an inexorable power beneath his plot." Wood further praises Bless Me, Ultima for presenting the "intriguing complexity" of Chicano consciousness and for being "an American novel which accomplishes a harmonious resolution, transcendent and hopeful."<sup>3</sup>

The novel develops the stages of confrontation and resolution begun by Rivera in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra. The New Mexico setting of both Anaya novels removes them from the rural and urban California settings we found in Pocho and Chicano and from the Texas migrant landscape in Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra. Anaya's quiet, New Mexico region appears to offer still another backdrop against which we see the Chicano coming to terms with herself and himself.

Anaya has discussed the significance of the landscape in both Bless Me, Ultima and Heart of Aztlán as he attaches critical thematic importance to the meaning of the setting. He prefers the Spanish "la tierra" to "landscape" because of the special importance the Spanish word has for him: "The Spanish word la tierra...conveys a deeper relationship between man and his place, and it is this kinship to the environment which creates the metaphor and the epiphany in landscape." Anaya sees one cause for alienation resting in characters separating themselves, spiritually, from the power and energy, the epiphany, represented by la tierra: "They [characters] lose their center, and most devastating, they lose their source of redemption." As we will see in



the discussion of both Anaya novels, resolution and integration come about, in part, because characters realize a new relationship with the land. Ultima's close relationship and respect for nature, represented by her tender care for the herbs and roots which allow her healing powers, provides Antonio with the guidance that will help him grow into manhood. And Clemente Chavez will finally become a leader of his people only after he recognizes that he must capture "this energy of the llano." Anaya associates "the epiphany in landscape" with the human capacity for love and ties in both directly with his own purpose for creating art and in making the New Mexico landscape a central feature in his work: "...just as the natural end of all art is to make us well and to cure our souls, so is our relationship to the earth and its power. I do not merely mean the awe and sense of good feeling which we experience in the face of grandeur and beauty in nature, I mean that there is an actual healing power which the epiphany of place provides."<sup>4</sup>

Bless Me, Ultima presents a world of complex oppositions as they are played out before and within the person of the six year old protagonist, Antonio Marez. Set in the mid 1940's in New Mexico, the novel focuses upon Antonio's spiritual growth from childhood confusion to adult understanding through his close relationship with Ultima, la curandera [healer] who comes to live with the Marez family during the summer of Antonio's sixth year.

The seeds of conflict and opposition that confront Antonio are established early in the novel as they are reflected in the relationship between his parents. Gabriel Marez is a man of the llano [plains] and identifies strongly with the freedom and restless wanderings that the plains symbolize. He has been a vaquero [cowboy] in Las Pasturas and as his name implies, he is the son of the restless seas, of the conquistadores who settled the region. He is meant to wander the earth in search of adventure. He has, however, married Maria Luna, daughter of farmers. The Luna men are closely associated with the quiet earth, and as their name implies, they are as constant as the moon. They are the descendants of the first priest who came to El Puerto, and Maria Luna's ardent wish is for Antonio to become a priest, a man of the people. Gabriel's wish, on the other hand, is to have Antonio cherish the wild llano. And it is only with the coming of Ultima that Antonio learns where his true self lies. The opposing forces of vaquero versus farmer and Marez versus Luna are both contained in the world of tradition operating in Bless Me, Ultima. The oppositions represent two aspects of one large relationship to life. Antonio's initiation into both aspects allows him to fuse both into his adult sense of selfhood at the end of the novel.

Situated atop a hill in the small village of Guadalupe, the Marez house is physically as well as spiritually divided between the opposing forces of Marez and Luna as it sits

between the fertile valley of El Puerto and the wide, expansive plains that are Las Pasturas. Into this house, Ultima, the healing woman who possesses magical powers that enable her to exorcise devils and lift evil spells, comes to live out the last years of her life. She has in the past been of great help and comfort to Antonio's mother during the births of her six children and has provided the community of Las Pasturas with both spiritual and physical aid and comfort. The Marez family feels it an obligation and an honor to provide a home for Ultima in her old age.

The intimate spiritual relationship that develops between Ultima and Antonio is prefigured early in the novel when Anaya describes the effect their first encounter has upon the boy: "She took my hand and I felt the power of a whirlwind sweep around me...I saw for the first time the wild beauty of our hills and the magic of the green river... I felt the song of the mockingbirds and the drone of the grasshoppers...the four directions of the llano met in me and the white sun shone on my soul. The granules of sand at my feet and the sun and sky above me seemed to dissolve into one strange, complete being" (p. 11).

Though the townspeople revere Ultima as a holy woman, blessed with supernatural powers, Antonio is the only person who is deeply in touch with the powers of human goodness and spirituality represented by Ultima. This accounts for the prophetic dreams Antonio has throughout the novel which enable him to transcend space and time. He is able, in

dreams, to witness his own birth, to witness the restless, wandering urges of his three older brothers away fighting the war, and to envision certain portentous events that befall the small community of Guadalupe.

During the time sequence of the novel, Antonio is confronted with tragedy brought on by the violent deaths of Lupito, the demented war veteran, and Narcisco, the town drunk, revealed to be a sensitive man, deeply in touch with the sources of goodness. Alongside of his experiences with death, Antonio confronts his own inability to understand the actions of the Christian God who allows death, sadness and evil to wander freely in the world. These doubts lead Antonio to discover a new god, the golden carp of Indian mythology who swims the waters of a secluded river and who is revealed to him by his strange school friend, Cico.

Antonio's major confrontation with evil occurs when Tenorio Trementina and his three witch daughters who perform black magic claim that Ultima herself is a witch. They threaten to kill her because she has lifted their evil curse from Antonio's uncle Lucas in El Puerto. Antonio participates in the casting off of the Trementina witches' curse; he witnesses firsthand Ultima's healing powers. The priest's inability to lift the curse, coupled with Tenorio's raging cries to kill Ultima once his daughters slowly begin to die as a result of Ultima's intercession in their evil spell casting, continues to shed doubt for Antonio on the effectiveness of the Christian God's priests and upon His

permitting evil in the world. The priest's prayers become ineffectual in comparison with Ultima's incantations; Ultima herself, moreover, is a devoutly religious woman which serves to enhance her magical powers. What Anaya leads the reader to see as Antonio himself comes to understand as well, is Ultima's grasp upon the simple power of human goodness. This accounts for her fearlessness in the presence of Tenorio and his threats upon her life: "...good is always stronger than evil. Always remember that, Antonio. The smallest bit of good can stand against all the powers of evil in the world and it will emerge triumphant. There is no need to fear men like Tenorio" (p. 91).

Antonio's apprenticeship under Ultima's guidance involves a return to a primal enjoyment of nature and to a pagan-like worship of the harmony inherent in it. Ultima teaches Antonio respect for the plants from which she gathers herbs to make her healing curatives. She teaches him reverence for the "presence" of the river, for the fertile earth and for living creatures. This reverence for things natural is embodied in Antonio's admiration for the beautiful golden carp which he is privileged to see and admire.

Ancient Indian myth identifies the golden carp as a kindly god who took pity upon the ancient people who disobeyed the gods and were turned into carp. In order to watch over the people, one kindly god asked to be turned into a carp so that he could swim the waters and live with

the people forever. He is the huge, golden carp who is "the lord of all the waters of the valley" (p. 74). Antonio is only one of several persons to whom the golden carp presents himself. Samuel, Cico, Narcisco and Ultima are in this select group because only they are capable of appreciating the golden carp's beauty and majesty. Only they would not seek to harm him. This select group, in addition, shares a common sensitivity to the golden carp as magical in its ability to appear at will before them. They look upon the carp with pagan-like admiration; they consider it a god of nature, much more beautiful than the Christian God.

Antonio's knowledge of the golden carp embodies the basis of his confrontation with the Christian religion. As we have seen, Ultima plays an important role, though it is an indirect one, in shattering Antonio's belief in traditional Christian belief. However, a clear sign of Antonio's authentic maturing insight into himself and into the life around him is seen when he himself questions, ponders and attempts to make sense of what the golden carp represents: "'The golden carp,' I said to myself, 'a new god?' I could not believe this strange story, and yet I could not disbelieve Samuel. 'Is the golden carp still here?' 'Yes,' Samuel answered. His voice was strong with faith. It made me shiver, not because it was cold but because the roots of everything I had ever believed in seemed shaken. If the golden carp was a god, who was the man on the cross? The Virgin? Was my mother praying to the wrong God?" (p. 74-75).

Antonio's fears and doubts about the Christian God's power become stronger as he witnesses the failure of his mother's prayers to prevent what Antonio knows is his father's greatest fear--that the three older Marez sons will leave the family for a more adventurous life in California.

The central oppositions operating in Bless Me, Ultima, as mentioned earlier, can be found in the Marez versus the Luna blood lines that flow in Antonio's body. Antonio's three older brothers--Eugene, Andrew and Leon--are presented as Marez men who like their father are restless wanderers not content to stay in Guadalupe. They are eager to go to California for jobs, money and women. Paradoxically, as Anaya clearly and skillfully shows, their Marez sense of adventure signals the shattering of Gabriel Marez's dream--for he and his sons to build a new life in the fertile vineyards of California. The sons, however, cannot be burdened with their father's dreams, for they have their own. As they set out for California without their father, Gabriel knows it is the Marez blood which makes them roam. Antonio remains, then, in the position of being both his father's and his mother's last hope for the fulfillment of their personal dreams, contrary though they be.

The oppositions between God and golden carp, between Ultima's magic and the priest's prayers, and between being a Luna priest or a llano vaquero all arise from the oppositions contained within Antonio's own being. His growth into manhood comes when he is able to resolve these opposing

forces for himself. In one of his dreams, Antonio envisions a raging tempest with himself in the center of it, being pulled on the one hand by his father telling him he has been baptized in the salt water of the sea and his mother on the other hand telling him the holy water of the moon has baptized him. Ultima appears to calm the tempest and to offer Antonio a vision of unity which he will be able to consciously integrate for himself only at the end of the novel when the events which will cause Ultima's death are set in motion. The vision of unity expressed by Ultima is quite significant because it dispels the antagonisms between the two ways of existence offered Antonio by his parents.

Ultima's vision speaks of harmony and order: "...the sweet water of the moon which falls as rain is the same water that gathers into rivers and flows to fill the seas. Without the waters of the moon to replenish the oceans there would be no oceans. And the same salt waters of the oceans are drawn by the sun to the heavens, and in turn again the waters of the moon...The waters are one, Antonio...You have been seeing only parts, she finished, and not looking beyond into the great cycle that binds us all" (p. 113).

Anaya's portrayal of Ultima renders her character the central unifying, integrative element in the working out of Antonio's initiation into adulthood and into life: "Through Ultima Antonio learns about a different past, which is not remembered precisely as history, but rather as legend and as a timeless, mythic past." Ultima is portrayed as deeply in



touch with the timeless, internal spiritual truths that give life meaning, value and dignity. More importantly, as a curandera Ultima is the character most in touch with the cultural past--with the tradition of healing that has played an important role in the Mexican American cultural tradition. As such, when she comes into Antonio's life she brings with her the tradition that will help him establish an adult sense of selfhood, leading to a harmony of being. Ultima's position as a curandera also allows her to bridge the gap between the empirical reality of the physical world and the undefined "magic" of the spiritual world. The power to associate with both "realities" is what gives Ultima's character such significance in the novel. Moreover, Ultima's way of life--that which she teaches to Antonio--is integrated and harmonious because it fuses the various features that make up human existence:

The curandera has learned skillfully to participate in the cosmic drama, and such participation does not lead to superiority or control of natural forces but is based rather on self-imposed limitations that are partly learned through cultural heritage and partly through personal intuition and experience. Ultima's healing practices and devices are intimately related to her natural "philosophy," in which body, mind and spirit are fused and in which a differentiation between the human and non-human worlds is not clearly established. Thus, there will always be something unexplained, an excess of emotion or intensity, in what she is called upon to do.<sup>5</sup>

In the final analysis, however, Ultima's truth is a simple one that is misunderstood by many characters in the novel precisely because of its very simplicity. She teaches Antonio to be brave in spite of life's tragedies, to be

ready to accept change that is inevitable, and to understand the power of goodness. The "magic" Ultima practices stems from her intimate understanding of life which gives her strength. Antonio, too, comes to understand this simple magic that is one of Ultima's powers when he observes:

"...I made strength from everything that had happened to me, so that in the end even the final tragedy could not defeat me. And that is what Ultima tried to teach me, that the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart" (p. 237). The "final tragedy" Antonio refers to is Ultima's death.

Tenorio plots to kill Ultima's owl once he discovers that it houses the spirit of her soul. Tenorio manages to kill Ultima's owl and is ready to kill Antonio, too, but is himself killed by one of Antonio's uncles. Once her "soul" is dead, Ultima's body quickly begins to prepare for death. As she lies dying, she tells Antonio to bury her owl under the forked juniper tree and to burn her medicinal herbs and ointments. Antonio is able to carry out Ultima's dying wishes because he has come to accept her death and has gathered the strength to go on with his life in spite of the tragedy: "From the point of view of the two principal characters, the novel is the story of the transference of Ultima's half-revealed truths and beliefs to Antonio. The story ends when Ultima dies and the boy has grasped her way of life sufficiently to promise a future of existential substance and meaning."<sup>6</sup>

Only a few short weeks before Ultima's death, Antonio has, in conversation with his father, finally synthesized the meaning of all the contraries that have been vying for his allegiance. On the trip to his uncle's farm in El Puerto where he will spend the summer learning the ways of the farmer, Antonio learns that his father has accepted life's consequences. Gabriel tells Antonio that his wish was for him to learn the ways of the llano, but that perhaps that way of life is dead, a dream that one should give up. In the same vein, Gabriel Marez speaks of his wife having to give up her dream of Antonio becoming a priest of the people.

As does his father, Antonio begins to reconcile the contrary ways of life offered to him by uniting them, as Ultima bade him do in the dream. He thinks to himself: "'Take the llano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, God and the golden carp--and make something new,'...That is what Ultima meant by building strength from life'" (p. 236). Antonio tells his father that "'maybe I do not have to be just Marez or Luna, perhaps I can be both--...'" (p. 236). Antonio realizes that the "something new" he will fashion for his future adult self must be made from the materials that make up the past, the traditions of both Marez and Luna that are inextricably part of him.

Once his vision of himself begins to move toward unity and harmony, Antonio's childhood confusion begins to fade. In his last encounter with Ultima, Antonio is no longer a

child, for he has understood Ultima's lesson--that life must sustain us through despair. Ultima delivers a last blessing upon Antonio which captures the entire meaning of the novel. It invokes no single Christian or pagan God or creed but reaches beyond both to capture a larger reality, one that can be shared by all men and women: "I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio. Always have the strength to live. Love life, and if despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills, I will be with you--" (p. 247). Antonio has thus been initiated into the powers of goodness and beauty which will help guide him into manhood and into selfhood. Antonio comes to realize that as an adult he will have to shape his own future; he will have to mold the past, his past, into a new future state of being: "Sometime in the future I would have to build my own dream out of those things that were so much a part of my childhood" (p. 248).

Finally, Bless Me, Ultima emerges as a story about the harmony of existence that comes from knowing one's self. As Herminio Rios points out in his short introduction to the novel, Anaya has helped us to know ourselves by drawing from the collective experience of the Mexican American people. Anaya has managed, Rios states, to "make the future not only bearable, but welcome," (p. ix) by presenting a harmonious vision of existence that partakes of "our myths, our legends, hopes, dreams and frustrations" (p. ix).

Antonio's quest for selfhood is set on its proper course through the guiding hand of Ultima, La Grande, symbol of the richness and power residing in the Chicano cultural heritage. The important message Ultima leaves with Antonio and with the reader lies in the final, solitary nature of that quest for the self. Antonio echoes this message when he answers the teacher who asks him what he wants to be when he grows up: "'I don't know...it's part of the thing I must learn about myself. There are so many dreams to be fulfilled, but Ultima says a man's destiny must unfold itself like a flower, with only the sun and the earth and water making it blossom, and no one else meddling in it--'" (p. 213).

#### HEART OF AZTLAN

Heart of Aztlan, Anaya's second novel published in 1976, returns to the theme of the Chicano search for selfhood via a personal confrontation with the ancestral past. Anaya has changed the setting from rural to urban New Mexico and has as the protagonist an adult man rather than a young boy come to be initiated into the promise inherent in the future through a prolonged immersion into the meaning of his racial, cultural past.

The Chavez family whom we meet in the novel are from Guadalupe. It is a small community in New Mexico near Las Pasturas, the town that plays an important role in Bless Me, Ultima as the home of Gabriel Marez. Clemente Chavez plays

a very minor role in Anaya's earlier novel as the man whose brother, the sheriff, is killed by the shell-shocked war veteran, Lupito. Chavez incites the townsmen to help him seek revenge and kill the man who has murdered his brother. Though his character is not at all developed, the brief picture we receive of Clemente Chavez is of an emotional, distraught man caught up in the death of a beloved brother.

In addition, there are brief references in Bless Me, Ultima to Clemente's son, Jason, who has a special relationship with an old Indian of the llano. During the course of Bless Me, Ultima, the old Indian is revealed to be in the select company who know of the golden carp's existence. By extension, Jason Chavez emerges as a character in touch with the mysterious powers of beauty represented by the golden carp. This sensitivity to beauty and to things magical continues to play an important role in Anaya's second novel.

Heart of Aztlán opens in the small town of Guadalupe as Clemente Chavez and his family prepare to leave in search of the jobs the small community cannot offer them. Adelita Chavez and her son Benji and daughters Juanita and Ana are eager to get to the big city, full of opportunity and excitement. Clemente, however, regrets severing his bond with the land which he feels has nurtured his soul. Though he understands and believes that the move to Albuquerque will provide his children with a new future, Clemente voices the fear that once they leave the land, he will have no traditions, no inheritance to pass on to his sons and daughters:

"'but can we take the spirit of the land with us?'"<sup>7</sup> To console him, Adelita scoops up a handful of Guadalupe earth in a coffee tin and says they will take a portion with them as a reminder of where their roots lie.

Once they arrive in the Mexican American barrio of Barelitas where they will make their new home, the Chavez family, each in his and her own way, begins to get accustomed to the new environment. Benji Chavez takes up with the barrio pachucos. He identifies with their aliveness and quickly fits into their brotherhood: "'Man, this place is really alive! Like those pachucos we saw this afternoon, they're all over. I walked down to the street light on the corner and I told them I'm Roberto's brother, and right away they treat me okay. The vatos [guys] here are a toda madre!' he exclaimed. 'They even offered me a smoke of marijuana, a toke they call it. 'Come on, ese, you're one of us, take a toke,' one of the vatos said. I did, and I tried to breathe it like I saw them breathing, and I choked--' Benji laughed to himself" (p. 19). Anaya's characterization of the pachucos is similar to Villarreal's in Pocho. Both writers picture them as restless rebels against all of American society and against traditional Mexican society that looks down upon their zoot suits and marijuana smoking. Both Anaya and Villarreal characterize the pachucho as the romantic embodiment of the raw, emotional undercurrent of life in the Chicano barrio. In Anaya's descriptions, the pachucos represent one lively segment of

the barrio's population: "At times the air bristled with the static of the pachucos, the zoot-suiters who went swinging down the street as if they owned it, speaking a strange, mysterious argot. Jason motioned at Benji, but he didn't have to because Benji was already looking, already entranced with the finger-snapping, duck-tailed chucos that Roberta had called los vatos locos in his letters from Barelás. 'Hey man,' he heard Benji whisper, 'that's cool--'" (p. 10).

The two daughters, Juanita and Ana, begin to envision for themselves good jobs with money to spend on good clothes and entertainment. Jason does not adapt quite as easily as the others; he continues to miss the quiet life in Guadalupe. Clemente, too, feels out of place, lost in the different pace of life in Barelás, unable to establish a sense of himself other than as a worker in the railroad yard shops.

Early in the novel, Clemente is introduced to Crispin, the old, blind guitar player who has the power to see into the future. Crispin's function is much the same as that of the character of Ultima in Bless Me, Ultima, for it is under Crispin's guidance that Clemente will take a journey through the past to discover the direction of his future just as Antonio did under Ultima's guidance.

In the character of Crispin, Anaya has managed once again to insert the aura of the magical into a modern day novel concerned with a realistic portrayal of life. Anaya's



purpose in creating this level of "magic" in his novels has to do with the vision he proposes--that modern man must reassert the importance of the magical, mythical, cultural past in order to recapture the meaning of the present and of the future. For the Chicano, particularly, the past contains a reservoir of magical beliefs and traditions from which he can generate a sense of selfhood.

The powers of the imagination in helping man to recapture his mythical, magical past are most clearly represented by Crispin's blue guitar. In using this symbol, Anaya has recalled Wallace Steven's well established image of the blue guitar as it represents the human imagination and its power to color the reality of fact. Crispin himself explains to Clemente the function of his music and of his blue guitar: "'Things as they are never appear the same on the blue guitar...For as ten fingers can nimbly play across the strings and make a hundred variations, the imagination has a million fingers that constantly reshape things as they are...'" (p. 14). Clemente's journey toward establishing an authentic sense of himself will rest on his being able, through his imagination, to reshape things as they are, to reshape his social and spiritual existence into a new state of reality that is harmonious and ordered.

A second contributing feature that establishes the magical level of meaning in Heart of Aztlan lies in Clemente's meeting the old Indian woman who possesses the magic rocks through which Clemente takes a journey through time

and space to find the true heart of the mythical land of Aztlan. Crispin strums his blue guitar and explains to Clemente that Aztlan is the land where they now live, where the first people lived who wandered south in search of a sign. Crispin then goes on to relate the ancient Indian myth recalling the founding of Mexico City and the discovery of the god Quetzalcoatl--the plumed serpent: "'It is a simple story,' Crispin continued, 'a burning god fell from the sky and told the people to travel southward. The sign for which they were to watch was a giant bird in whose claws would be ensnared the poisonous snakes which threatened the people. In that place, under the protection of that plumed bird, the wanderers from Aztlan were to build their new civilization'" (p. 84). The old woman's rocks are said to have been gifts from the gods to the original people who wandered from Aztlan to settle by the river where they found the plumed bird, where they founded the ancient city of Tenochtitlan. These wandering people from Aztlan are the forebearers of today's Chicanos. Though the rocks are said to be evil, Jason reveals that his old Indian friend from Las Pasturas has told him that the rocks are evil only when used by evil men for evil purposes. When Clemente summons the courage, midway through the novel, to invoke the power residing in the rocks, they become the medium through which he is catapulted into a spiritual journey through his past, the past he shares with the wandering people of Aztlan. Crispin reveals the importance the legend of the wandering

people of Aztlan has for today's Chicanos when he speaks of it continuing to renew itself with each generation: "'There is a meaning in all the old stories of the people,' Crispin smiled, 'that is why we cannot let those legends die... think of the exodus of the people from Aztlan...It is a story which far surpasses the wanderings of the Jews of the Bible, it is an odyssey where gods visited with men as they once did in the stories of ancient Greece...there is passion, and there is tragedy, and there are the foundings of civilizations that equal those of the old world...and all of it here, on this earth, on this land of Aztlan...'" (p. 84).

Before Clemente Chavez begins his spiritual journey, however, Anaya skillfully develops the narrative to portray Clemente's need to discover himself by presenting his increasing confusion regarding what meaning his life has in Barelás. His son Benji and daughters Juanita and Ana succumb to the aimless lifestyle popular with the barrio youth. They come and go as they please, asking no permission from Clemente as they did in Guadalupe. Clemente feels he is losing his position as head of his family when he is laid off from work for showing his dissatisfaction with unsafe working conditions and sub-standard salaries offered at the railroad yards. Clemente takes to drinking, and he becomes bitter at the realization that his daughters are supporting him. When he tries to reassert his authority over them, they brashly remind him of his dependence upon them which he bitterly knows to be the truth. He feels

united with the other workers who have decided to call a strike against the rail yard management; yet they are unorganized and powerless to fight the political corruption of the puppet union leader who answers to the rich bosses.

Though Crispin tries to educate the workers to the source of unity offered in the old legends from which they might gain the spiritual strength and inspiration to carry on their just fight, they do not understand the meaning of their connections with the past. Crispin tells them they need a sign, a leader who will guide them just as the ancient people from Aztlan were to know the place they were to establish a new civilization when they saw the perched eagle with the serpent in his mouth. Clemente attempts to understand the meaning of the legends, but he has not yet delved deep enough into himself, into his past: "He [Clemente] was bound up with the people of the story, and with the legend of the eagle and the serpent, and all that related somehow to him and to the strikers who sought justice, but he didn't know how. And the place called Aztlan was like a mysterious word, latent with power, stretching from the dark past to the present to ring in his soul and make him tremble" (p. 85).

Jason Chavez, unlike his brother, shys away from the mindless self-destructiveness of drugs. He, too, recognizes changes that have begun to disintegrate his family. Throughout the novel, he and Clemente search for the answers and beliefs which will give their lives meaning in Barelas.

Clemente, particularly, is fearful of the changes he does not understand. Adelita, in her simple though powerful understanding, recognizes that one must accept inevitable change: "'Let it change,' Adelita said. 'We will make ourselves strong for the change that comes. If our roots and our crianza [faith] are deep enough, we have nothing to fear--'" (p. 41).

As Clemente and the growing numbers of striking shop workers are reduced to depending upon welfare handouts for subsistence, the need for leadership and direction becomes more pressing. Lalo, the hot-headed advocate of violence, is able to stir the men to anger, yet they distrust his willingness to use violence. Some men want to consider Clemente as a possible leader because he has stood up to the corrupt union leader, but Clemente harbors too many insecurities; he feels unable to lead the men into any organized fight for their rights. His continued dependence upon alcohol drives him deeper into bitterness and insecurity until during a bitter snowstorm he lies down, drunk and ready and willing to die.

Clemente is spared from death, however, when Crispin finds him. Crispin claims he has had a vision telling him to go out into the blizzard. Realizing that he has been saved from death for some purpose, Clemente claims he is ready to search for the meaning of the ancient legends: "'I will search for these signs, I will find that magic heart of our land about which you whisper, and I will

wrestle from it the holy power to help my people!'" (p. 122-123). Clemente says he sees his struggle to help his people as one with the struggle of the ancient people to return to their original homeland of Aztlan: "'It was because of the throbbing of the heart called them back! Hundreds of years passed and they never forgot the homeland! They returned to complete the cycle. Now I must move in search of that source of strength'" (p. 126).

Crispin leads Clemente to the hut of the old Indian woman who possesses a magic rock formed by the fiery serpent god who walked upon the earth. When the earth cooled, it turned into rocks with magical powers. Clemente is determined to discover the power held in the magic rock from which he has once before run away. As he lays his hands on the rocks, Clemente reels and spins into the magical world of the rocks. He and Crispin are transported to a river filled with people who are carried helplessly by a rushing current as they cry to Clemente to be delivered from injustice. As he continues to walk among crumbling temples, searching for the heart of the river, he is told that he must travel alone through a burning desert, that he must pass through all manner of pain before he can approach the door to the sacred lake. When he finally comes upon the sacred lake, Clemente is tossed into the raging waters with throngs of other people in chains, crying out to be delivered. As he is tossed about by the waters, Clemente becomes one with the suffering people. He feels their pain and

shares their need for deliverance. Only after his experience of unity with the sufferings of his people, does Clemente encounter the real heart of the sacred river where the seven springs meet and form a living center: "He had come to the source of life and time and history. He reached out and grasped with bleeding hands the living heart of the earth...he felt the rhythm of the heart of Aztlan beat to the measure of his own heart. Dreams and visions became reality, and reality was but the thin substance of myth and legends. A joyful power coursed from the dark womb-heart of the earth into his soul and he cried out I Am Aztlan" (p. 131). Clemente's identification with the heart of Aztlan provides the basis for his establishing a sense of selfhood that allows his life to take on new meaning. Once he has acknowledged his bond with his people, Clemente discovers that together they are Aztlan.

When Clemente returns from his spiritual, magical journey and goes back to the barrio of Barelás, the people decide he has lost his mind what with his mutterings on about having had a vision and of having discovered the heart of Aztlan. Clemente, at this point in the narrative, is convinced that the workers need leadership and direction. Though he is still not quite able to see himself as the leader, he believes he need only approach powerful persons such as the priest, Father Cayo, and El Super, the rich owner of the barrio's supermarket, to find a leader for the workers.

Father Cayo insists that the Catholic Church has no business getting involved in political struggles, that it cannot foster revolution against the status quo because of the unknown nature of the aftermath of revolutions: "'In the end, another empire, another structure rises from the ashes of all that misery and destruction, and we can never be sure that its rule will be more just or its methods more humane than those of its predecessor. Think on that, Chavez, think of it, then let things remain as they are--'" (p. 142).

Likewise, El Super puts no stock in the revolution Clemente is attempting to stir up. El Super thinks the barrio people lazy, unfit and generally incapable of sustaining a worthwhile struggle for justice. El Super talks in terms of survival--that the people of Barelás will quickly give up Clemente's ideas about brotherhood and justice once their personal security is in danger.

Though discouraged by the hardness and cynicism of both men, Clemente remains firm in his vision of unity. He gathers the courage to decide that he himself will lead the men in their crusade against oppression. He attempts to share with the people his newfound rebirth of optimism in the promise inherent in their common past: "The space between us can be bridged, a bond can unite us all! If we are to survive as a people, and if we are not to become like the Americano, then the soul of the people must rise above that hell of individual alienation!" (p. 147). Though the men do



not fully understand the spiritual rebirth that leads Clemente to assume the position of their leader, they acknowledge happily his position as their spokesman. As the novel ends, Clemente leads a procession of barrio families in protest against the oppression that has divided them. Anaya describes the people as infused with the optimism of Clemente's words. They are fearless in their readiness to do battle against the injustices at the shops. At the novel's end, Clemente is a man who has experienced a spiritual rebirth. He recognizes that he has been initiated into spiritual unity with his people, a unity that creates a living center: "...I am a man whose flesh and bones were molded by the earth of the llano, its weathers and moods are part of my spirit, but when I walked on that mountain I felt a power I have never felt before...and it was only when I reached out and grabbed hold of the people in the river that I could feel the heart of the land..." (p. 188). The importance of la tierra, the land, in Clemente's initiation and his realization that its heart is to be found in the unity of his people recaptures the importance the land had for the ancient, wandering people of Aztlan. The promise that they would one day rediscover their homeland made of la tierra a symbol of their common struggle to establish a permanent unity.

Heart of Aztlan's concentration upon the adult initiation into the spiritual powers residing in the Mexican American cultural heritage complements nicely the story of

childhood initiation in Bless Me, Ultima. Both novels illustrate clearly Anaya's passionate concern with stressing the importance of the rich, communal past through which the individual Mexican American can come to know a personal self. Anaya's vision of ways in which the individual is to achieve an authentic sense of self resides precisely in the process of confrontation, of a face-to-face coming to terms with the past. For Anaya, this confrontation results in a newfound awareness of the glory and power residing in one's ancestors and in their history. Anaya's poetic prose captures the forcefulness with which he views the cultural past as the authentic heart of the Mexican American people, the center wherein the modern day Chicano reader can go to discover who he or she is.

Anaya's infusion of the magical element into his novels serves clearly his entire thematic purpose--to propose that the mythical, magical past is that part of the tradition most able to provide the necessary spiritual atmosphere for the quest for selfhood. In the characters of Ultima, la curandera, and Crispin, the blind musician, Anaya has created the medium between the world of myth and that of reality. Both characters are the mediums through which the protagonists reach back to the past to find its relationship to the present. Ultima teaches Antonio the centuries old respect for the enduring ideals of goodness, truth, valor and love for life. Crispin guides Clemente into an awareness of his spiritual continuity with the ancient people of

Aztlan who were determined to find their homeland. Crispin helps Clemente understand that man as master of the blue guitar has the power to reshape "things as they are," and that the love man has for his fellow men recaptures the spiritual togetherness experienced by the wandering people of Aztlan.

Anaya successfully illustrates in both Bless Me, Ultima and Heart of Aztlan the growing maturity of vision in Chicano fiction. He shares with Tomas Rivera a sensitivity to language and to the effectiveness of images and symbols. In addition, Anaya's skillfull use of ancient Indian mythology and mythological figures in his novels provides a very effective dimension to his fiction.

As novels of discovery and initiation into the cultural heritage, Bless Me, Ultima and Heart of Aztlan serve as clear examples of Chicano prose fiction's concern with the quest for the self and ways in which the Mexican American is to go about this journey. The old, blind guitar player, Crispin, captures the essence of this journey when he tells Jason Chavez: "'I had to search for the past to find myself...To travel back into time, I learned, is really only to find a spot where one can plumb the depths'" (p. 28). This recapturing of the cultural past is perhaps Anaya's most significant contribution to Chicano literature. He has managed to show his readers and himself that in the past resides the vision for the future:

By venturing into that seemingly distant world of the past, Anaya discovered that a considerable past of that world was buried in his own being...Anaya has not only begun, with his Bless Me, Ultima, to create a sense of existential wholeness for himself but he has also succeeded in projecting into the collective Mexican-American experience an harmonious and coherent cultural base. As creative writer and spokesman for the Hispanic-Mestizo minority, who for too long has struggled in the backwaters of American life, Anaya gives every indication of invigorating the cultural growth of his people and of verifying the existence of an inner force and power in their daily lives.<sup>8</sup>

The effect Anaya's work has had upon other writers of Mexican American literature is difficult to assess at this time. However, parallel visions of the search for meaning and of the importance of confronting the past can be seen in Estela Portillo's short fiction to which we turn in the next chapter.

## Notes to Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup>Rudolfo Anaya, Bless Me, Ultima (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, 1972), p. 234. All subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Review of Bless Me, Ultima, by Rudolfo Anaya, Publishers Weekly, 205 (March 18, 1974), 54.

<sup>3</sup>Review of Bless Me, Ultima, America, 128 (Ja. 27), 73, 74.

<sup>4</sup>Rudolfo Anaya, "The Writer's Landscape: Epiphany in Landscape," Latin American Literary Review, 5, No. 10 (Spring-Summer 1977), 99, 101.

<sup>5</sup>Daniel Testa, "Extensive/Intensive Dimensionality in Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima," Latin American Literary Review, 5, No. 10 (Spring-Summer), 74 & 77.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>7</sup>Rudolfo Anaya, Heart of Aztlan (Berkeley: Editorial Justa Publications, 1976), p. 7. All subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>8</sup>Daniel Testa, "Extensive/Intensive Dimensionality...", p. 78.

## CHAPTER V

### THE SELF AS PART OF THE UNIVERSAL WHOLE: ESTELA PORTILLO'S VISION OF SELFHOOD IN RAIN OF SCORPIONS

...each living thing is a momentary spark of a long and complicated history of consciousness...No two samenesses, but all part of an eternal sameness.<sup>1</sup>

The publication in 1975 of Estela Portillo's collection of short fiction, Rain of Scorpions, added to the ranks of Chicano prose fiction yet another series of well-crafted works which established more firmly the increasing sophistication of Chicano literature.

Portillo's position as perhaps the most widely recognized Chicana writer today warrants some discussion of her feminine perspective as it enhances the general "voice" of contemporary Mexican American literature. Approximately half of the selections in Rain of Scorpions contain as protagonists women characters whose lives initially lack order and meaning largely because male characters have dominated the direction of their lives. Such characters as Clotilda de Traske, Beatriz and Nan come to know personal freedom only after they have gathered the courage to confront what alienates them. Though these acts of courage range from appearing nude at an engagement ball in order to proclaim

independence to murdering a drunken abuser to taking a long and difficult pilgrimage to the site of Mexican Catholicism, these women characters resolve their lives--they put them in order.

Throughout Rain of Scorpions Portillo's women are also those most in touch with what gives life meaning, with what gives a person selfhood and her life order. Lola, the Indian from Batopilas, forgives her tormentors because she loves them and knows they have misunderstood that her clay figurines are an homage and not a defilement of life. Even in death, Refugio in "Pay The Criers" teaches Chucho to be a "lusty warrior full of battle cry" (p. 26) when confronting life. And Mama Tante in "Duende" is full of the gypsy passion for life that allows her to love life when Marusha sees it as hopeless. Finally, Portillo's vision of the Mexican and the feminine sensibility seem to merge in the sketchy but symbolic character of Elsa in "The Secret Room."

Elsa's simple love for art, for the Mexican countryside and for the earth forces Julio to confront his own preference for her rather than for the cold, German Helga. Elsa represents the emotional Mexican sensibility as Portillo identifies it with Elsa's own femininity. Those qualities of endurance, bravery, independence, tenderness, pity and love that Portillo finds essential to the formation of any authentic self and to order, she presents largely in her female characters. Portillo's perspective as a woman author enlarges upon the development of the search for selfhood and

order in Chicano literature by presenting the female experience as representative of human experience. Moreover, the women in Rain of Scorpions more often than not, must teach men sensitivity, must teach them the way to achieve selfhood and order.

Portillo's vision of women as the persons in society who have an especially insightful relationship and involvement with life bears resemblance to other minority American women authors' vision of the feminine role. In the world of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, for example, the black experience of violence, suffering, humiliation as well as love is filtered through the female characters in the novel. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, two young girls growing up in Loraine, Ohio in the 1940's, experience all the trauma of growing up black in a white society where white-skinned, blue-eyed little girls are the norm for beauty and goodness. Though they are poor and envious of the white school girls who wear pretty dresses and buy ice cream after school, Claudia and Frieda grow up in a loving family. Their major childhood experience of tragedy comes to them not firsthand but through the tragic situations involving eleven year old Pecola Breedlove.

Morrison uses the character of Pecola to represent what underlies the tragedy of the black experience in white society--the black person's own desire not to be black. Pecola's pathetic wish to have blue eyes symbolizes the extent to which she has been forced to internalize white



society's view of beauty. She considers herself ugly as do all of the Breedloves, and in this dislike for themselves lies their inability to "breed" any "love" for themselves personally or for each other. Morrison indicates that Cholly Breedlove's incestuous attacks upon his daughter Pecola are his perverse way of touching and loving her. When she gradually loses all contact with reality after her father's sexual attacks, coupled with the resulting pregnancy and death of the child, Pecola imagines herself blue-eyed and beautiful. Her madness, the death of the baby that everyone hated and said had no right to live anyway, and the springtime that would not sprout marigolds from Claudia's and Frieda's seeds symbolize the barrenness of Pecola's life as it represents the tragedy of the black experience in the 1940's. In addition, the tragedy in The Bluest Eye seems particularly effective because it is centered in the vulnerable, black female child's experience of having to contend, as the male does to a much lesser degree, with a society who rewards its blue-eyed Shirley Temple look-alikes. All of white society's sins against the black man and woman are contained, Morrison shows, in Pecola's pathetically fervent wish to have the bluest eyes of anyone. Both Portillo and Morrison effectively use the female experience as it speaks for the total experience of being Mexican American and being black in a white society.

Rain of Scorpions participates in the stages of confrontation and resolution in the Mexican American search for

the self. Characters in these stories, particularly in such selections as "The Paris Gown," "The Burning," "The Secret Room," "Duende," and "Rain of Scorpions" must confront aspects in their cultural past in order to be at peace with themselves. There is clear indication, however, that Portillo's vision of selfhood for the Chicano reaches beyond the limits of any specific cultural tradition and partakes of a reality that meshes the individuality of a personal realization of selfhood with the universal human arrival at self-definition. In so doing, Portillo, writing in the mid 1970's, helps define the last stage of transcendence in the Chicano quest for the self toward which the selections in this study have been evolving.

The opening story in the collection, "The Paris Gown," focuses upon the human capacity for courage once the "self" is in danger of becoming a prisoner of another's conception of what that self should be. Theresa has come to Paris to visit her grandmother, Clotilda Romero de Traske. Clotilda's many marriages, travels and acquaintances have created a legend few women have attained back home in Mexico. Theresa's concept of her grandmother is revealed to be one of glowing admiration for the woman who experienced freedom when few women enjoyed the luxury of determining their own futures. Clotilda's artistic temperament and leanings become the focus and representative of her life of freedom. As a collector and dealer in art, Clotilda's artistic surroundings illuminate, for Theresa, the essence of her

grandmother's character: "How fresh and open was the world in this room. Theresa felt that the room itself was a composite of what Clotilda had become in the life process. Every piece of art and sculpture gave the impact of humanness. The colors were profuse and rich; they seemed to touch impulse and awaken still undefined passions. Yes, it was a room with a singular ferocity for life" (p. 2). Clotilda's "ferocity" in determining what direction her life was to take is revealed to have taken place when she was a young girl living in Mexico. Promised in marriage by her father to a man more than twice her age, Clotilda violently resisted being forced to live according to her father's and Mexican society's wishes. Clotilda reveals that her status as a woman demanded her utmost obedience. As a child, she had not been free to express an interest in or pursue any activity not considered feminine such as horseback riding, painting or travelling. Only her brother was allowed to have such interests. The occasion of her engagement ball, however, becomes the occasion of her statement of independence.

On the day of her engagement ball, Clotilda makes her appearance at the festivity in her honor in the nude. Everyone is shocked, the wedding is cancelled and Clotilda is recognized insane by her father and given ample funds to live in Paris away from the society she has rebuked. Clotilda recalls that her actions represented her only avenue toward freedom. Her decision to appear naked, without the

suffocating lace of the magnificent Paris gown her parents had ordered for the occasion, revealed her innocence and "the declaration of a truth" (p. 6). This "truth" had been prefigured for her earlier by the little boy who decided that in order to better enjoy a swim in the pond outside Clotilda's window, he would take off his clothes, never thinking anyone would force him to feel ashamed for doing so.

Clotilda's freedom from the blind tradition of her youth that attempted to keep her frustrated and unfulfilled is explained by the now older woman to the younger one in terms of the blindness of "reason." Clotilda says that men subject instinct to reason in order to accommodate themselves, and that this is a true representation of barbarism in the modern world: "...barbarism is the subjugation of the instinctual for reason...But man's reason is a boxed in circumstance that has proved itself more violent against human beings than instinct" (p. 3). The essence of order and integration in art as well as in life is explained by Clotilda in terms of the importance of the instinctual element of man's makeup: "Instinct is a part of survival law; it is also a part of what gathers a wholeness. Barbarism is a product of limited reason. And what reason is not, at least in part, limited? It is important to leave the field of invention open in art as in life" (p. 3). Clotilda's life has been guided, as Theresa comes to realize, by a continual freedom, a "field of invention." The inventiveness

becomes the key to establishing one's sense of self and to a subsequent experience of order.

In the second story, "The Trees," Portillo gives us a view from the other side, so to speak. Nina, the lovely yet destructive woman who marries Ismael and enters the Ayala family, has known life only as devoid of the instinctual. She has never loved nor been loved. She has been a cast-off since childhood, surviving only at the pleasure of someone's momentary feelings of pity. This explains her possessiveness, her wanting to gain complete control of the apple orchard owned by the Ayala brothers in order to establish herself as someone of worth.

As she manages to create divisiveness among the brothers who before her coming had known only harmony and trust, Nina finds that she comes no nearer to achieving a satisfactory sense of self but comes closer to an annihilation of self. As she sets in motion the situation which will turn the brothers against each other--her supposed rape--she distances herself from any center of wholeness or order. She, in fact, succumbs to disorder and insanity when one by one, the brothers kill one another.

Portillo portrays Nina as a victim of disorder. She cannot recognize or embrace the orderliness that comes with human love: "He [Ismael] had loved her with a gentle touch. But how could she love? She did not know how...Sooner or later death comes. He had said many things she did not understand because she had never known light and

freedom" (p. 21-22). Nina emerges from the story as the character most victimized by the disorder present in the human community. This outcome is prefigured early in the narrative when the omniscient narrator speaks of persons as part of a process over which they sometimes have no control. Unlike Clotilda who was able to exercise control over her destiny, Nina is reduced to a being who is merely a part of a process: "...they are but creations of a process, self created with ingredients from creations outside themselves" (p. 11). This "process" becomes the "curse" which is alluded to at the story's end. It is embodied by the violence that has been Nina's life and which she brings to the Ayala family: "The Curse? Is not all violence...silent and corrosive, insidious in its everyday ways...is that not the curse?" (p. 22-23). The barren and lifeless valley that once held the flowing apple trees of the Ayala orchards represents the effect of that curse upon man.

Portillo's concept of man's victimization by destructive forces operating upon him is seen again in the character of Manolo in "Recast." An interesting and thematically critical discussion by the omniscient narrator concerning protective "armor" introduces the narrative. The armor or shells certain animals are given by a protective nature to ward off enemies and a hostile environment are compared to the unseen but equally protective armor that people erect to ward off danger. The armor that persons develop is said to come about because there is no "resilience" (p. 69) to the

hostile environment: "But if the resiliency does not come about, then, the reliance is on the hardness of the armor. For after all, the thing to do is to protect the soft spots. Resiliency builds upon an inner skeleton of spirit that makes of mind and heart a loving thing. The hardness of the armor is another situation. If soft parts find themselves in circumstances alien to their nature, the shell becomes a perpetuating destruction that can explode the very soul" (p. 69). The human armor then becomes the substitute for the resilience one needs to experience "a bouncing way of life" (p. 69).

The first glimpse we have of Manolo is of his "soft parts" being attacked by the insensitive girl who ridicules his small stature and features. In response, Manolo learns to don a protective armor, "...a heroic, handsome image; a template of the virile man of power...it shone above the ordinariness of people..." (p. 70). When his armor is attacked, Manolo learns to respond with destruction.

Attempting to confirm his image of himself, Manolo becomes an actor and a dancer but never lands the leading parts which would truly give him a feeling of having attained his vision of himself. Because he knows he can never land the role of leading man, Manolo, as he becomes established in the theatre, enjoys thwarting the aspirations of the young dancers and actors who vie for the major roles. Chita, the young and talented dancer, at first enjoys Manolo's patronage but soon falls out of favor

because she will not allow him to command her every move. She becomes the object of Manolo's revenge, and he manages to destroy her chances for moving up to leading dancing parts.

Manolo's sense of power at being able to thwart someone else's success is given clear description when Portillo describes his emotions as he rehearses a fight scene from a musical in which he will perform. The picture of Manolo's total involvement with his role as the leader of the gang, with the power he sees as real comes through clearly in the following description: "Manolo's sinuous heat followed the drum beats. The spotlight caught the contortions of the sinister face. This was an offering to his god...Destruction. He flashed the knife dramatically not wishing to lose the message of death...Manolo thrust out his chest, lifted himself in full pride and stood priming his full profile... the pose of the conqueror, Manolo had the full feel of the kill" (p. 77). Manolo's dance routine becomes a sinister foreshadowing of his own death at the hands of Chita's boyfriend. Manolo's death occurs with three swift thrusts of El Soldado's knife, but there is no applause.

Manolo's armor becomes, in the end, ineffective because it is false. We see a destructive character in Manolo; however, we should look closely, as Portillo intends us to, at his victimization. Portillo contrasts Manolo's fear of loneliness with the secure person's view of loneliness as seen in Clotilda's wish to be alone without a man she



doesn't love or need. Loneliness, to Manolo, is dark and fearful. To the resilient person "Loneliness and suffering...can become a challenge to beauty and to self-discovery. There is no need for a shell...Darkness is a hope of a wider radius of light to be discovered" (p..70). Both Nina and Manolo, in contrast to Clotilda, never become free to discover the "wider radius of light" which allows the self to be known. They remain prisoners of the shells they have constructed for protection. They never share in the freedom of which Clotilda's daring to appear naked before the world is symbolic.

Portillo's preoccupation with man's victimization takes on a different cast in both "The Burning" and "If It Weren't For The Honeysuckle..." The central characters in both stories suffer spiritual and physical abuse at the hands of persons who either want to keep them subservient or want to destroy them. Though Lola, la curandera dies, she does experience, along with Beatriz who manages to escape her condition, a sense of triumph over her tormentors. Neither of these characters are victims of their own self-destructive tendencies as are Nina and Manolo. Rather, Lola and Beatriz, in their triumph over their oppressors, regain spiritual control over their destinies. They experience a sense of order and freedom.

In "The Burning" Lola is the victim of several village women who claim she is a witch and that she must be killed. Though Lola is a curandera [healer] able to heal the sick

with her "miracle sand" (p. 90), we see that she is in reality a powerful and good woman. The distrust the women of the village have for her is based upon their jealousy, pettiness and ignorance. They are suspicious because Lola, an Indian from Batopilas, never gave up her pagan religion for Christianity. In addition, they have no understanding of what the clay figurines which line the inside of Lola's hut represent. They see the dolls only as specimens of Lola's witchcraft.

In the course of the story, we learn that the carving of the clay figurines is an art Lola has learned as a child from her mother. The figures are replicas of the rural gods who guarded over her village in Batopilas. Each figure's facial expression represents the spectrum of human emotions: "...the expression on the tiny faces measured the seasons of the heart. They were live little faces showing the full circle of human joy and pain, doubt and fear, humor and sobriety. In all expressions there was a fierceness for life" (p. 91). There dwells within Lola, too, this passion for life, this "ferocity" that Clotilda used to gain freedom. The little clay figures "...dwelled boundless in the center of her being. The little gods had always been very real, very important, in her reverence for life" (p. 91). Her devotion to life had been evidenced in her love for the townspeople despite their petty distrust. She had left Batopilas as a young girl because "there was always that reach in her for a larger self" (p. 92), that groping for a

more fulfilled sense of self. Though she had tried to find it among the villagers, now as she lies dying in her hut, there is talk by the women of setting fire to it to destroy not only the figurines but Lola also.

The sense in which Lola triumphs over her tormentors is wholly spiritual. She forgives them their ignorance and continues to love them simply because they are, because they exist: "Here, in the silence of aloneness, she had looked for the little gods in the townspeople. In her mind she had molded their smiles, their tears, their embraces, their seeking, their just being. Her larger self told her that the miracle of the living act was supreme, the giving, the receiving, the stumbling, and the getting up" (p. 95). Lola's reverence for life allows her to rise above her victimization. Though she dies at the hands of the townswomen, her "larger self" claims victory over her physical annihilation.

Beatriz's capacity for endurance in "If It Weren't For The Honeysuckle" parallels Lola's love for the human struggle for the larger self. At fourteen, Beatriz had run away with Robles, the travelling vegetable man. She had grown tired of the slavery to which she had been reduced caring for nine brothers, and Robles had promised her a house of her own. But Beatriz, under no illusions, knew of his many other women and of his drunkenness. And she was not surprised, therefore, when over the years she found she had to set about building the house herself. She had taken on odd

jobs for twelve years in order to build it which soon housed not only herself but Lucretia and Sofa, two younger women Robles had recently brought to her in the same neglected condition she herself had been in when she ran away with him. They both, as Beatriz had done earlier, submit to Robles' demands because they need food, clothing and shelter. Robles has with time visited the house less frequently, but his entrances are marked by drunkenness and violence as he becomes suspicious that the three women are plotting against him.

Beatriz confronts the slavery of her life with Robles just as Julio Vass Schleifer confronts the slavery to inhumanity that is part of the life his father would have him embrace which involves exploiting the Mexican landscape and the people. The recurring theme of the need to confront slavery and alienation in order to assert freedom and order also occurs in "Rain of Scorpions" when Fito tries to escape Smeltertown rather than look within himself, as El Indio Tolo had done, to find the courage to attack the company's polluting the air with poisonous chemicals. Much as Clemente Chavez runs away from confronting his slavery to the railroad yards in Heart of Aztlan, so does Marusha in "Duende" fail to see herself as a slave to her materialistic, shallow concept of freedom as centered in money and luxuries.

What animates Beatriz, what allows her to confront her slavery is her realistic view of things. She is a woman who has "...no patience with the romanticizing of

things" (p. 100). She lives with one goal in mind--to give order to her existence. This is evidenced in her love and care for the garden, her determination in building the house herself and in her caring for the poor, lost women dominated by Robles. We are told that Beatriz "made herself a part of things around her in a clean dispassion, a calculated, simple order of a sanity all her own" (p. 99). As this love of order comes to dominate Beatriz's life, Robles increasingly becomes the one element of disorder remaining in it.

Robles himself confirms this when he returns after a long absence, drunk and destructive, and sets about to break everything in sight in order to prove to Beatriz that the house is not hers because it sits on his land. Though she calmly sets about to restore the house after his rampage, she decides that "an operative evil had to be destroyed" (p. 105). With calm and precision, Beatriz quiets Robles and invites him to eat a bowl of soup into which she has placed the three white, poisonous Amanitas she had found earlier in the morning while pruning her honeysuckle plants.

With Robles dead and buried, the order of things Beatriz has worked long and patiently for finally arrives. The reader has, by the end of the narrative, come to sympathize with the character's feelings and actions and comes to understand Beatriz's willingness to take the responsibility for killing Robles. His physical abuse of the women and his wish to destroy what they have worked for clearly establishes him as the disruptive force in the story. Though the

order that is established arrives at the expense of Robles' life, Portillo intends for us to realize Beatriz's capacity for survival amid physical disruptiveness.

"If It Weren't For The Honeysuckle" has some relationship to "The Paris Gown" insofar as both women are victimized by men, although to different degrees. Both women, in addition, manage to attain freedom though at relatively high costs. This narrative completes the group of selections dealing with characters who are victimized by persons or forces that attempt to quash their physical and spiritual selves.

A second grouping of narratives in Portillo's collection concern themselves with characters who experience an epiphany-like revelation of personal truth regarding their lives and thus are able to establish a clearer sense of themselves as persons. Characters in these narratives turn away from self-defeating avenues of existence and become participants in a larger level of existence that encompasses various spiritual realities of courage, freedom and truth. Portillo's vision of transcending the private self begins to fashion itself clearly in these narratives.

In "Pay The Criers," Chucho comes to admire and love the mother-in-law he has spent his life hating. At her death, he acknowledges that Refugio has loved life passionately, much as Triano and Mama Tante have in "Duende." She has endured it in a way Chucho is only just beginning to understand. Before coming to this realization, however,

Chucho wants to defame her memory by spending the money she had set aside for her funeral. Leaving her corpse to rot in a corner of his hut and against the pleadings of his wife, Juana, Chucho sets off on a drunken, whoring spree with the funeral money.

On his return, however, Chucho in his drunken state is shocked by the reality of the corpse still lying in the hut and to find that it has created an unbelievable stench--the smell of death. The reality of his deed sets in when he is told that the body is to be burned by city officials unless it is buried. The Roman Catholic tenet against cremation stirs Chucho to frantically search for ways of getting back the money he was to have spent on hiring the criers to mourn at Refugio's funeral. The only donation he can gather is from the madame who runs the brothel.

During the early morning hours, Chucho sits with the body atop a hill and allows the body to "see" one more sunrise. Chucho comes to acknowledge that "In life Refugio had been a lusty warrior full of battle cry. The ready passion, the ready appetite, the way out of things, all had been her banner" (p. 27). Chucho recognizes that Refugio had developed a "skill" for enduring life: "She spat on misfortune and dug her heels for a fight because life was a grand thing to her" (p. 34). In the cold of the early morning, Chucho buries Refugio with his bare hands, and as a farewell says to her: "I love you, Refugio, for having lived" (p. 40). The "skill" Refugio developed for life corresponds to the

"push and flex of life that finds its way to man" (p. 40) and allows him to experience "a freedom, a way of depths, a way of new life" (p. 40). Chucho's understanding of Refugio's "skill" allows him to grasp a reality that he had before not known. In so doing, he participates in life on a much grander scale, as did Refugio, with a surer, fuller sense of himself.

The two central characters in "Pilgrimage" and "The Secret Room" come to acknowledge life in much the same sense as does Chucho, though Portillo has in these selections intertwined the realization of truth with certain features residing in the Mexican frame of reference.

In "Pilgrimage" Nan is the Anglo woman bent on self-destruction after her husband leaves her for another woman. In the midst of her erratic behavior brought on by drinking and pill popping, Nan, out of desperation and an amount of hope, decides she will accompany her Mexican maid, Cuca, on a religious pilgrimage to San Juan de los Lagos to make an offering to the Virgin de Guadalupe. Nan initially goes on the pilgrimage out of curiosity, but she becomes slowly enchanted and touched with the simple faith of the hordes of peasants who make the long journey to San Juan de los Lagos. Cuca's simple desire "To be reborn" (p. 43) imprints upon Nan's mind the peaceful determination with which the people cross the desert to the shrine. As Nan herself becomes one with the people she realizes "There was an ease here that



had nothing to do with wealth or success; it was a richness close to nature and to the realness of people" (p. 46).

After crossing the border into Mexico, Nan realizes a "strange metamorphosis of spirit" (p. 47) and freedom that allow her to shed "old, sad, frightening things" (p. 47). She discovers that for the first time since childhood she can pray to God. She leaves off hating her husband because she discovers that like St. Augustine she has arrived nowhere in her search for Evil. It is in the eyes of the Virgin where there is "the knowing of the centuries...Nature with its fertile womb of compassion" (p. 53). Nan comes finally to discover, moreover, that she herself houses "all the love there is..." (p. 53). This discovery of the personal self as the source of all potential good anticipates the discovery made by the young boys in the longest and most important work in the collection, "Rain of Scorpions." In the self lies the capacity to confront any amount of fear and alienation; in the self lies the key to order. The Mexican peasants in "Pilgrimage" with their profound simplicity of faith become the critical symbol of order and peace that Nan so desperately desires and ultimately achieves.

This Mexican simplicity coupled with the people's attachment and identification with the earth plays a critical role in Julio Otto Vass Schleifer's decision to choose a "Mexican" rather than a "German" way of life in "The Secret Room." Julio is a Mexican by birth but of German ancestry.

He is heir to his father's mining fortune in Chihuahua but vacillates between embracing his father's hard, cold German attitude toward the exploitation of the land and people and his desire to identify with the unmolested land and the quiet dignity of the Mexican people.

Julio recalls his father's love of power and devotion to Hitler's idea of Aryan superiority. There is pressure upon Julio to save the dwindling fortune, his father's testament to German superiority. This can be accomplished by marrying Helga Kleist, the rich, beautiful German woman deeply devoted to the idea of German superiority. But Julio's attraction is for Elsa, the young artist, who is content to travel around the Mexican countryside teaching art to young schoolchildren. Elsa's goal in life is to learn "to see" because "There's so much to look at. It's hard to learn to see...one can so easily miss something... something that puts all things in their place" (p. 84).

Torn between feeling a loyalty to the memory of his father and of his own desire to be rid of a business which treats the earth and its people without sincere human compassion, Julio is able to "see" as Elsa sees only after he has entered his father's "secret room." Once inside the dark, musty room which houses all manner of hunting guns and equipment, Julio feels the full impact of his father's perverted values as he gazes upon the portraits of Bismarck, Porfirio Diaz and Adolf Hitler which line the room's walls. As he ponders the faces of those "masters" who sought to

make slaves of others, Julio comes to the liberating realization that it is the "slaves" of these dictators who have remained so completely human: "But all these slaves, in spite of chains, kept part of the earth; much more than the men on the murals. Their dependency, their vulnerability spoke of something very human. The men on the murals had lost that. The slaves had mastered the earth qualities. The masters are chained to sad, false violent dreams. They have killed the earth" (p. 87). Julio decides he will not participate in "killing" the earth. As he tears down the portraits and allows sunlight to enter the room, he "felt very, very Mexican" (p. 87). He will join Elsa at Vera Cruz and leave his father's dynasty to crumble.

As Julio at last finds himself in his identification with the Mexican people and with their love for the earth, Portillo, the omniscient narrator, says simply that "Julio felt whole" (p. 87). The arrival at order and harmony takes place through Julio's identification with Elsa's vision of humanity set forth here as characteristic of a Mexican sensibility. In Mexicanness, Portillo says, there is a key to order.

Closely aligned with the Mexican passion for the earth is the gypsy's cante hondo, that passion for life, "the deep song of human roots springing forth to claim human things" (p. 66) that guides Triano's and Mama Tante's lives in "Duende." Marusha, Triano's younger sister, doesn't value the gypsy's passion for life. She wants a good job, a nice

neighborhood to live in and financial security and status. Though Triano tries to guide her into an appreciation for the meaning of their gypsy ancestry, the legacy left them by their father, he realizes she for herself must come to realize the fiery spirit of duende that asks for "little beyond a personal freedom" (p. 58).

Marusha fails to understand Triano's and Mama Tante's simple love for humanity. Marusha feels only disdain for the prostitute living upstairs who decides to make a home for her blind child after abandoning him earlier. Marusha cannot understand Triano's sympathy for the woman and love for the child. In the spirit of duende, Portillo suggests, one discovers a sense of self participating in a larger life, one that transcends personal hardships: "All was fire. The sun, the song, the fiery earth, the dance, the struggle for life, the facing of the brave bull...all was fire, and that was the spirit of the duende" (p. 66).

Confronting life, facing "the brave bull" is the metaphor for participation in "the struggle for life," and until Marusha is able to see herself as a part of that spirit, her visions of her self will remain hopelessly out of joint. The "wholeness" Triano and Mama Tante feel through their love for life becomes the emblem of their integrated vision of selfhood and how that self induces a kind of order for them that Marusha does not experience.

In the longest and most important work in the collection, "Rain of Scorpions," Portillo brings together the

thematic threads that unite her stories--confronting the alienation of slavery; resolving to live life with "ferocity;" discovering the self through this confrontation with life and, finally, transcending to a larger identification with all women and men. She creates in "Rain of Scorpions" a final vision of the human struggle for self-definition and existential order.

The setting for the narrative is Smeltertown, a small Texas town composed largely of poor Chicanos. The main action of the story parallels Clemente Chavez's efforts to gather support to call a strike against the railroad yards in Heart of Aztlan. The main action in "Rain of Scorpions" centers upon Fito's attempts to unite the townspeople to take action against the smelter plants that are poisoning the air with sulphur fumes. As a wounded Vietnam war veteran, Fito harbors feelings of bitterness and anger against what he perceives to be a world composed only of chaos. Though Papa At, the old storekeeper, attempts to help Fito come to a new awareness of man's potential for good and for creating harmony out of the chaos of the world, Fito cannot, like Miguel and the other young boys, believe in the stories of El Indio Tolo and the map of the green valley. When Fito proposes to the townspeople at a special meeting he has called that they voice their protest at intolerable living conditions by simply leaving the town en mass, they scoff at his unrealistic, whimsical notions of escape. What Fito fails to recognize and feel a part of is the extent to which

the townspeople feel Smeltertown, bad as it is, to be their only home, the place where they've invested their lives.

In their wish to provide the town with a new place to live once they see Fito's plan unanimously rejected, Miguel and his companions set out on a secret journey to find the cave of El Indio Tolo and the map of the green valley. They have been inspired by listening to Papa At's afternoon stories at the store recounting El Indio Tolo's encounter with the god Gotallama. As a young man, El Indio Tolo was filled with hate for white men and killed them wantonly. But Papa At relates that El Indio Tolo was unsettled with his deeds; he felt a "chaos" (p. 118) inside; he did not feel part of the "wholeness" (p. 118). The god Gotallama wanted to help El Indio Tolo find peace so he led him into the cave beyond the city to a green valley. Papa At relates that "In the green valley, the hate, the confusion became a peace; so El Indio Tolo lived with Gotallama and left the secret of the green valley in his cave" (p. 119). It is to this cave, in search of the map, that Miguel and four other boys go early one morning.

Fito's myopic view of the town's situation is sharply contrasted to Papa At's view of "chaos" and its place in the whole scheme of things, its position in the universal order of things. Papa At sees the pattern of man's lives operating in a dialectical motion, with chaos a necessary element, an antithesis that spurs on the formation of a new thesis, a new force that brings order into being: "...seeds are

scattered by old dying plants. The dying plants become the food for the new seeds. The old plant is a chaos, but it is full of a new seed. But the new seed is new life...The green valley has chaos. It is its food, but the green valley lives because the chaos becomes an order, a peace out of love" (p. 119). Fito's response to the "chaos" that is Smeltertown is to run away from it. Papa At's response is to confront it, to take the Indian-Mexican view of Chaos as part of the whole in which man as well as the beasts and the elements share. This view does not call for passive acceptance of "Chaos" but rather for an understanding of its place and a response to it which will transform it into order. Indeed, Papa At recognizes "Chaos" as a force equal to that of order since "The order of the universe is not clear and tidy with everything in its place; it is an order that makes things equal to make them free" (p. 117). "Chaos" contains, therefore, the potential for order.

Fito's disillusionment over his inability to propose a realistic solution to the problems that plague the people of Smeltertown leads him deeper into cynicism. He thinks of men in terms of ants as they go about working in some pre-arranged pattern. He is sharply contrasted to Miguel and the boys as they set out to discover the green valley. Fito is also contrasted with Lupe, the woman who loves him from afar, but who dares not tell him of her love because she is overweight and unattractive. Her devotion not only to Fito but to her elderly grandmother who depends upon her for

support gives truth to the omniscient narrator's interpretation of Lupe as one who "...kept an internal pulse with the greatness of things" (p. 128).

As they set out on their secret journey to the cave of El Indio Tolo, Miguel and his companions begin the task that will show them to be participants in the "greatness of things." During their absence, a terrific rainstorm hits the town. Because the natural course of the river in the town has been tampered with, it cannot receive natural flood waters. As the rains hit the soft mountainsides and create mud waters, Smeltertown becomes a "mud sponge." The townspeople are forced to evacuate their homes. The only route to safety for Lupe and her grandmother is through the sea of mud which has engulfed the floor of the home and which by now carries thousands of scorpions with it. As she carries her weeping, frightened grandmother on her back to higher ground, Lupe holds fast to the conviction that they will be saved though she collapses in the sea of scorpions just as help arrives.

The inhabitants of Smeltertown manage to survive the mudslide, but Miguel and his companions are unaccounted for and presumed dead somewhere in the sea of mud. The boys meanwhile manage to enter the cave of El Indio Tolo and to make their way to the very center of it where they find a stone slab with the Indian word K E A R carved upon it. Though their journey has been a very dangerous one, demanding that they climb through crevices and walk on crumbling



ridges to reach the crystal lake where the slab lies, they are ecstatic over their discovery of the "map" in spite of their not fully understanding its meaning.

As they make their way home, they discover that a memorial mass is being held in their honor. Upon marching into the church with the stone map to the green valley, they begin speaking to the astounded congregation about their adventure, about El Indio Tolo and the map. Papa At is the only person who understands what the boys have accomplished.

As the city later settles down to the job of rebuilding, Papa At settles down one afternoon to the job of explaining the meaning of El Indio Tolo's map to the boys. He reveals that the Indian word K E A R is the word for YOU, that "Man is the most green, the most alive" (p. 178) of those elements that constitute the earth. Man is revealed to be the green valley, the place where "chaos" is turned into order. This was the truth that Gotallama, the god of fire and water, revealed to El Indio Tolo in the cave: "He [El Indio Tolo] had done many things in his life, bad and good, but most of all he remembered the part he played in the universe. This was the message of his blood, of his earth. In the cave, he sifted the blindness from his eyes and found a simple clarity called peace. He wrote this experience on the stone" (p. 178). The human self becomes the final ordering element in the universe of Portillo's fiction. The scorpions are revealed to be a part of a whole, too, insofar as they represent a step in the evolutionary process that culminated

in man: "...each living thing is a momentary spark of a long and complicated history of consciousness" (p. 134). Though there is the natural order in the universe which the evolutionary process represents man, unlike the rest of nature, is capable of ordering chaos, of not being simply the object of order but the perpetrator of it. Herein lies the significance of "YOU." Miguel speaks the entire meaning of the story when he announces: "I am a green valley" (p. 178).

Fito, too, at the end begins to "order" his "chaos." As he sees the townspeople gather up the remnants of their homes and their lives after the flood, he decides that he, too, must search for the "something" that gives them hope: "I want to find something myself...something without anger" (p. 165). Fito wants to discover the self that will allow him to identify with all who have found meaning, "something without anger."

The search for selfhood in Portillo's work is conveyed from within the larger, universal search for order and meaning. She does not make as consistent use of strictly Mexican American frames of reference as do Tomas Rivera or Rudolfo Anaya; but the presence of Mexican, Mexican American, Indian and gypsy characters, environments and cultural values and beliefs in all ten selections establishes Portillo's vision of the search for selfhood and order as operating within the boundaries of certain cultural connections which unite many of her characters. The particular

spiritual capacity for courage, endurance and passion shown by the large majority of characters in Rain of Scorpions must be attributed to a common human sensibility shared by them--a sensibility characterized by a deeply spiritual approach to life. It is understood in the world of Portillo's fiction that all Mexicans, Chicanos, Indians and Gypsies share a common legacy from their fathers which is the large capacity to live life with passion, to attain order and share it with others.

In Rain of Scorpions, Portillo has also expanded the developing vision of the search for the self in Chicano fiction. Her characters acknowledge the self largely as the product of a particular sensibility nurtured by certain cultural groups. That individual self, however, ultimately participates in a larger harmony of being when it transcends itself into a larger identification with all women and men. "No two samenesses, but all part of an eternal sameness" (p. 134).

Portillo's vision of transcendence, of a going beyond the private self characterizes the fourth and final stage in the quest for the self. Orlando Romero's vision of transcending the personal self in Nambe Year One, to which we turn in the next chapter, is a continuation and enlargement of this vision of transcendence.

## Notes to Chapter V

<sup>1</sup>Estela Portillo, Rain of Scorpions (Berkeley: Tonatiuh International Inc., 1975), p. 2. All subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE VISION OF TRANSCENDENCE: ORLANDO ROMERO'S NAMBE YEAR ONE

'Yes, Mateo, I can see your pain. I've seen it from the very first time you met her. I once loved that way, Mateo. I know that it is little comfort to hear it from me, but I, too, loved a wandering Gypsy. Mateo, the truth is I still love her, and I still see her glow in the darkest night.'

A striking and important work in the body of contemporary Chicano prose fiction, Nambe Year One, illustrates the latest stage of development in the quest for the self--the vision of transcendence. Portillo's collection of short fiction shows strong evidence of working toward a similar vision of the self, but Romero's novel illustrates even more clearly that the Mexican American writer in the mid-1970's is working out of vastly more complex metaphysical vision of the Chicano's search for selfhood and order than did such early writers of the Chicano Renaissance as Villarreal and Vasquez.

Nambe Year One was published in 1976 and though it has not yet received many reviews, two that have appeared discuss its sophisticated use of stream-of-consciousness technique and its striking use of images in describing the

protagonist's struggle for self-definition. The review in Choice in February, 1977 describes Nambe Year One as a "moving story about the mysterious forces that dwell in the human psyche or in the collective subconscious of Mexican-Americans."<sup>2</sup> Fray Angelico Chavez writing in New Mexico Magazine calls the novel a "minor masterpiece" though he claims he is not in touch with "the new Joycean literary set"<sup>3</sup> and cannot respond or comment appropriately to Romero's "free-flowing narration."<sup>4</sup> Despite Chavez's references to the "hallucinogenic vertigo" he experiences reading the novel, he agrees with the Choice review that Nambe Year One is a work well worth investigation.

The protagonist of the novel is Mateo Romero, [the relationship to the author is obvious] inhabitant of Nambe, New Mexico, who uncovers "the mythical world of ancestral traditions" as he "struggles for self-definition and self-determination in a chaotic world."<sup>5</sup> Mateo's journey toward the discovery of the self involves the by now familiar intimate confrontation with the past as it has been preserved in the generations of Romeros who have also traversed the path toward self-knowledge.

The village of Nambe represents Mateo's personal history. The bones of his ancient ancestors lie one thousand feet below Nambe, but their vital, spiritual presence imprints upon Mateo his ties to the earth of which his people have so long been a part. The spirit of his ancestors continues to pervade the earth, to haunt our protagonist.

These Moors, Jews, Arabs, Spaniards and Indians have left upon the face of Nambe their particular passion for discovering "los misterios del universo" [the mysteries of the universe].

What Mateo has inherited from his ancestors is a burning, indeed, an all-consuming desire to know intimately his relationship to the universe which surrounds him. This inheritance is both a blessing as well as a curse, for the soul which inhabits Mateo's body, having "earth" people for ancestors, is not content to know only surface realities. Mateo's inheritance takes the form of a spiritual, metaphysical quest for meaning, a quest colored by Nambe's early inhabitants' characteristic desire for plunging headlong into life with passionate intensity. Symbolizing this passion for meaning is the wandering, green-eyed Gypsy to whom Mateo is magnetically attracted. This desire for wandering in pursuit of the Gypsy--the cante hondo that Portillo uses in "Duende" to represent Triano's and Mama Tante's passion for life--represents the continuity of ancestral traditions in Mateo's life. Thus, his grandfather's attraction for the Gypsy is passed on to Mateo: "A wild, frantic gleam fills his [grandfather's] eyes. His vision goes beyond...to a place where a road rips the stillness and turns the stagnancy of living into dream songs of wild revelry...to a place beside the soul of the Gypsy with the dancing bear. My grandfather has been touched by her aura, and his emanations are both confusing and profound as they enter his living

blood in the cyclic pattern nature has deemed his grandson" (p. 9, 12).

In creating the figure and symbol of the Gypsy, Romero has made clear use of traditional, romantic associations of the Gypsy as the incarnation of primal human passion. In addition, an important feature of Romero's Gypsy is the feminine essence of her being and the uniquely female lure of her attractions. The importance of "la hembra" [the female] in the Gypsy's identification with the spirituality of man's quest for meaning and being functions neatly and consistently with the figurative, sexual coupling that takes place between the Gypsy and those men who have embraced her. The Gypsy as woman makes clear the epitaph to the novel: "A la hembra, puerta de los misterios del universo" [the feminine, door to the mysteries of the universe]. Mateo's response to the "feminine" forms the sensibility which has been bequeathed to him. That response is embodied in the quest for self and meaning, and the attraction to the wandering Gypsy is the symbol of that quest. Through her, the mysteries of the universe are knowable.

The narration in Nambe Year One is illustrated through a series of vignettes that span Mateo Romero's past and present encounters with the Gypsy. Much as in Antonio Marez's dreams in Bless Me, Ultima, there is no chronological time sequence to the episodes as the scenes and time periods move from past to present and back again to a remote past before Mateo's birth. In the several vignettes dealing



with the remote past, one or several of Mateo's ancestors are the central figures who encounter the influence of the Gypsy. Their encounters with her figure importantly in Mateo's own later wanderings; together the encounters with the Gypsy constitute the inheritance, the tradition which is carried on by Mateo. Each ancestor's encounter with the green-eyed woman and her dancing bear is an intensification and a cementing of the bond between Mateo and the people of Nambe and the Gypsy.

In the present time of the novel, twenty-seven year old Mateo lives with his wife and two small children in the house that four generations of Romeros have occupied. It reverberates with the presence of the Gypsy. Mateo reveals that his way "is lighted by the glow left in the walls by the Gypsy" (p. 13).

Juan Lopez Romero, Mateo's great grandfather, is revealed through his letters to the woman who would later become his wife. Juan Romero is a person infused with the spirit and passion of the Gypsy. His letters express his capacity for love and his attraction to the "gentle lady" with whom he wishes to share "The poetry of living and dying" (p. 48). As he sits beside the old cedar chest containing his great grandmother's love letters, Mateo creates in his fantasy a picture of Juan Romero engaged in a wild, foot-stomping flamenco dance which becomes a figurative expression of the man's intense involvement with life and his intense devotion to the woman he loves. A second later

letter records Juan Romero's association with a green-eyed tea merchant bearing magical herbs and teas and who acts as an emissary to Romero's ailing lady. The merchant is said to possess "a strange aura" (p. 45), and "a certain calm and mystery are part of his words" (p. 45). The reader sees that the merchant bears the influence of the Gypsy; his green eyes are symbolic of his possessing the fire and passion associated with her.

Elsewhere throughout the novel, the reader encounters Mateo's grandfather, Don Joaquin, an elderly man who relates to Mateo his lifelong preoccupation with following the Gypsy. Though he has lived alone without constant female companionship, the old man's life has been spent in communion with the feminine lure of the Gypsy. The "wild, frantic gleam [that] fills his eyes" (p. 11) displays to Mateo his grandfather's involvement with the Gypsy's passion. The reader learns, also, that this love for her has not been passed on to Don Joaquin's son, Mateo's father. He is the "lost babe" (p. 25) to whom Don Joaquin refers in his recollections of early encounters with the Gypsy. Mateo recalls his father's dependence upon liquor and his later desertion of the family. However, as the mature Mateo recalls childhood disillusionment over his father's "lostness," he speaks of being aware now of his father's need for "love, compassion, understanding, peace, kindness and a chance for the [his] soul to express itself" (p. 26). Though the Gypsy has not been a part of Mateo's father's life, yet her influence

makes it possible for Mateo to see his father as a soul in need of the life-sustaining forces which are represented by the passion for the Gypsy.

Throughout the incidents in the narrative that portray Mateo's childhood and adulthood relationship with Don Joaquin--the episode with the Payasos and Magicians, listening to Don Joaquin's annual Ash Wednesday retelling of Doña Sebastiana's encounter with death and Don Augustin's funeral--the intimacy between Mateo and his grandfather is a central focus. As the sequence of events in the novel chronicle Mateo's discovery of the intensity of his attraction to the Gypsy, he comes to understand his particular affectionate and spiritual kinship with Don Joaquin's lifelong devotion to the green-eyed woman with the dancing bear who consented, long ago, to spend one evening in Don Joaquin's humble home.

Mateo discovers that through his grandfather he has inherited a particular sensitivity to life which involves embracing with passion life's hardships as well as triumphs. An equally important discovery Mateo acknowledges in the course of the novel is all man's inherent potential for developing what has been passed on to him through ancestral tradition. Mateo discovers that all men possess the power to become intimate with the Gypsy, and that he is destined to meet the Gypsy in all those men and women who have been touched by her: "We are destined to meet one another. Lovers, brothers and sisters, sons and fathers. Though

there may be no physical brother or sister or lover, our souls search to meet what is to be shared" (p. 17).

Discovering the presence of the Gypsy in other people is the basis for Mateo's transcending his personal history, his identification with the larger community of man, and for his vision of the cyclic nature of his existence. Just as he feels a kinship with the land that is Nambe because it is the burial ground for the bones of his ancestors, he feels a kinship for the natural life around him and for all the future life that he will nourish after his death: "Death is not dying, but coming back again to nourish living things" (p. 15). As Mateo wanders in the Bandelier Canyon feeling the presence of "ancestral ghosts" and their involvement in the struggle of living and dying, he sees all of humanity's participation in "the great, primal essence" that Portillo's characters come to feel a part of. Mateo also comes to see the violence inherent in living. But his passion for living and his attraction for the Gypsy is renewed in the presence of Nature, in the comforts of the earth to which Mateo realizes he ultimately belongs: "The primal essence and its source is renewed. My consciousness, heightened by the wildness in Nature, enables me to perceive my organic and cosmic place in Nature, the Gypsy and the World" (p. 32).

Mateo's recognition of his intimate ties to the spirit of the Gypsy is embodied in his attraction to those persons who have also been touched by her powers. His identification with those persons solidifies and makes clear for him

his "cosmic place" in the world of the Gypsy. Aside from his close and intimate relationship with his grandfather, Mateo encounters persons during his twenty-seven years who carry within them the spirit of the green-eyed woman.

La Bartola, the woman with the pack of wild dogs who lives a reclusive life beyond the pueblo of Nambe comforts the child Mateo with her sad tale of her son Manuelito's disappearance some years before. Her disheveled and wild appearance makes her the target of the neighborhood children's taunts, but Mateo is enchanted with her wild green eyes. Though her life has been one of loneliness and sadness over Manuelito's disappearance, Mateo detects the fierceness in the eyes. It is the same fierceness as Refugio's in Portillo's "Pay the Criers" which is represented in the power she has called upon to help her endure the pain.

A different aspect of the Gypsy's essence appears in the episode concerning Mateo's childhood trip with his grandfather to see the performing Payasos and Magicians. Mateo's spontaneous participation in the magician's act, his running on stage to help the magician whom he thinks has been shot by a person in the audience represents Mateo's essentially naive, instinctual response to life. Mateo's inability to distinguish between reality and the mere appearance of reality, however, becomes the focus of a larger sensitivity which the young boy possesses. Mateo's rushing on stage to help the magician is evidence of Mateo's wish to

help, of his simple, young and innocent response to what he believes is a frightening situation. The magician recognizes and sympathizes with Mateo's reaction to the act. The understanding that passes between them once the mock shooting is revealed as merely a part of the show is symbolized by the bright green gem the magician presses into Mateo's hand after the performance. It represents the magician's recognition that Mateo is one who lives by the influence of the Gypsy. Out of the entire audience, Mateo alone responded intuitively. Though Don Joaquin reprimands Mateo for having been taken in by the staged shooting, Mateo knows, as he and his grandfather head for home, that the older man understands fully why Mateo acted as he did: "...he visually scolded me for having been foolish in advancing toward the stage. Everyone would know that he brought me to see the Payasos, but then, as if he too had a young heart, he smiled at me and I knew everything was going to be alright. He knew everything in life had a purpose" (p. 91).

We learn in a later episode when Mateo has passed into young adulthood that he has given the green gem for safe keeping to Don Augustin, an elderly man reputed to be over one hundred years old. The episodes "Wisdom" and "The Funeral" recount a green-eyed woman's coming to a recognition of her "gypsiness" through her relationship with Mateo and Don Augustin.

Mateo's fondness for the woman with "the mournful green eyes" (p. 92) moves him to help her become aware of the

power residing in her own person to capture life for herself. She is lonely and wants Mateo to relieve her aloneness. Mateo speaks of wanting to be the agent of her coming to a realization of her "fertility": "...I longed to destroy the stagnancies of living in her fertile green womb" (p. 92). Mateo tells her he will give "life" to her "wings" by taking her to visit the aged Don Augustin whom all of Nambe acknowledge as a man of limitless wisdom and in whose words people discover "the way to life" (p. 93).

Tucked within the mountains of Nambe, Don Augustin lives in a small, secluded village. His stooped and weathered body, wrinkled face and gnarled hands belie the power of life that vibrates within the old man. Mateo surmises that Don Augustin "...knew the realities of living, but he stubbornly clung to the force and mystery of living" (p. 96). This "mystery of living" the old man imparts to Mateo and the green-eyed woman during their day-long stay with him. He tells them stories of his quiet life spent in the company of the wild animals and of his love for Nambe. He plays the violin and the two young people dance underneath the cottonwood tree, a simple dance of childish delight in being alive. Don Augustin's wisdom is revealed to be the simplicity of his ability to take delight in the mere physical pleasure of being alive: "'In my old age, all I live for is the promise of new life and the smile and joy on people's faces'" (p. 99). As the green-eyed woman comes to know that "her essence was being strengthened," (p. 100) she realizes

along with Mateo, that they are being reborn into "the way to life." The dance becomes symbolic of the ritual of their immersion into life as Don Augustin knows it: "'...we danced as if the children in our souls were as boundless as the movement of the stars and as endless as the infinity of the universe...We lived in each other's joy and sorrow and our lives were as natural as the cyclic pattern of life and death'" (p. 100). As the dancers collapse into each other's arms, "exhausted and dizzy with the joy of living," (p. 100) they also feel the weight of "the realities of living" (p. 100) that are sure to press in upon them once they leave Don Augustin. Their fears are well founded, for Don Augustin dies in his sleep that night.

"The Funeral" recounts the ritualistic return of Don Augustin's body to the earth to replenish Nambe, a ritual Mateo has understood when he says: "Death is not dying, but coming back again to nourish living things" (p. 15). The old man's death unleashes a violent yet purifying tempest upon the usually quiet village; the morning of Don Augustin's funeral, however, is calm and sunny. The children of the village pick flowers to lay at Don Augustin's gravesite while Mateo carves the figure of the rising sun on the wooden coffin. The entire village participates in the outdoor funeral mass which Romero clearly presents as a celebration of life rather than as a mournful farewell to the dead Don Augustin. Mateo acknowledges the old man's funeral as a celebration of life when he is able to shake off his



feelings of grief which made him question Don Augustin's passing: "What would happen to those like me and the Gypsy [the woman of this particular episode] when all the old ones were gone? Who would counsel us and give us answers written on the petals of wild flowers...In life is memory all we have?" (p. 107). Mateo is able to answer his own question when he observes the children singing as they pick wild-flowers for the grave: "At that instant, I knew that I, too, had the ability to turn sorrow into life and wild flowers" (p. 108). The green-eyed woman who with Mateo the day before had danced to Don Augustin's violin music expresses sorrow at the funeral; however, Mateo recognizes that she has come to a greater understanding of what meaning the old man's life has had. Through Don Augustin, the woman, now called "Gypsy" by Mateo, sees her potential for turning "sorrow into life" (p. 108).

The two episodes discussed above together occupy a central position in Romero's work. Together they emerge as the core of Romero's vision, his presentation of man's ability to discover his individual self as part of the entire cyclic nature of human existence. Both Mateo and the young woman take part in a spiritual rebirth; they discover that simply to be alive is cause for celebration because to be alive is to participate in a grand undertaking--life. Don Augustin teaches them through the simple pleasure he takes in playing the violin, dancing and telling stories, to discover their own capacities for living with passion. The

"selves" they discover are, indeed, a revelation of their coming to grips with the intimate, spiritual aspects of their response to life.

Romero's vision, however, transcends the mere personal limits of selfhood. Mateo Romero and the green-eyed woman grasp the transitory nature of their human existence when it confronts them in the death of Don Augustin. At the same time, however, they recognize their participation in the ongoing process of living. Their intimate "selves" merge with the larger realm of existence. The sense of participation in the life that transcends the limits of personal being is best exemplified in the elaborate ritual undertaken by the villagers of Nambe to bury the old man. The villagers together mourn the passing of Don Augustin, but they also celebrate his love for life. As Mateo and the woman join in the funeral ritual, they merge with the throng of people who together represent the ongoing process of life renewing itself. Don Augustin's funeral is a reminder of the fleeting nature of man's personal self; the funeral ritual and the celebration of life that emerges from it is a reminder of man's participation in an ongoing, regenerative existence.

The importance Mateo places upon the spiritual presence of his ancestors whose bones lie one thousand feet below Nambe come to rest, as well, in their participation in the human cycle of life. They become identified with the earth, the life sustaining earth that is Nambe. Mateo's reverence for his ancestors, his acknowledgment of their past

participation in the life cycle of Nambe uncovers for him the richness of the legacy left him. By continuing to roam after the wandering Gypsy, Mateo fulfills his role not only as a Romero but as a son of Nambe, the land which has been touched by the Gypsy. He discovers his ties to his ancestors with whom he feels spiritually, inextricably bound:

"We are born as a people, we live as a people, and we die as a people. If in our lifetimes we have gone astray and have lost our essence, it is memory that will bind our children to the goodness that our first people understood, and which existed between themselves and the earth of Nambe...without first realizing my organic essence and relationship with the earth, I will never reach another plane" (p. 142). Mateo highlights here the importance of his ancestral past, and it is the "organic essence" to which he refers. He posits this identification with his past--the past represented by Nambe--as a stepping stone to "another plane" of existence. Once Mateo confronts and embraces his heritage, he finds that it allows, in fact, enables him to transcend the tradition itself. Mateo finds that he becomes one with every other man and woman who wanders after a Gypsy. And, ultimately, the figure of the green-eyed Gypsy represents man's striving to invest his existence with meaning despite the looming, inevitableness of death. Mateo refers to her as "The hope for mankind," (p. 33) and Don Joaquin says that to follow the Gypsy is to live as their forefathers did in opposition to "the ugliness of man's limited imagination" (p. 169).

Mateo's "timeless voyage" into the past, his encounters with the people who in some form have touched his life represents his coming to grips with the presence of the Gypsy, his decision to allow her to triumph over "this crazy invader [that] is determined to cover the world with ugly and cold concrete" (p. 168).

The importance of the "feminine" in the symbol of the Gypsy is best understood in Romero's use of traditional romantic associations with the distinctively female as opposed to the male sensibility. Those persons associated with the Gypsy, those who are attracted to her, are responsive to the deeply emotional aspects of human existence which Romero defines as the feminine outlook on life. Life, for them, is a passionate emotional experience that encompasses not only happiness but sorrow as well. While the strictly male sensibility cannot appreciate wildflowers, the wild beauty of Nambe or the majesty of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, those in touch with the Gypsy--the embodiment of the female--are keenly responsive to the intoxicating pleasures afforded by nature.

Responsiveness to beauty is an important aspect of the feminine sensibility; however, Romero just as forcefully presents the feminine capacity for endurance as an integral aspect of the Gypsy's nature. The foremost representation of endurance in the work rests in the figure of Mateo's mother. She is reminiscent of Portillo's stoic women characters who carry on with life despite suffering. Mateo's

mother is the long suffering woman who continues to remember past girlhood dreams of love and happiness as a way of sustaining her faith in life. Though she has been deserted by Mateo's father, she continues to remember the days when he courted her, when he was romantic and young: "'Your father used to call me 'Lady of the Rain.' He was a very handsome man, then, he hardly ever drank. He used to spend his time reading books. I had never heard or dreamed of those books. He used to write me the nicest words. They filled my head with dreams and made me feel sort of special because he could think of me that way'" (p. 49). Though memories of her husband are painful, Mateo's mother remembers the hopefulness of her love for him. And the reader sees that as she lies dying of cancer, she does enjoy a fleeting re-encounter with the man of her dream-like past. Ironically, Mateo's father comes home to comfort her as she dies, not knowing he will also soon die. Mateo recalls: "My father's breath was fresh. He returned home to die, but ironically he returned home to comfort the dying. With some form of reserved courage during my mother's last year, he managed to bury her without touching the stuff" (p. 38). Mateo's mother's life represents a picture of hopefulness. She tells Mateo when he is a child: "Don't hate your father, I don't. Have faith and you'll live a long time" (p. 48). Her feminine capacity for endurance and hope in spite of sorrow gives meaning to the words Romero has placed at the head of the chapter that presents her portrait: "La Hembra

Es La Puerta A Los Misterios Del Universo" (p. 48). The feminine sensibility becomes the passageway to a larger, fuller and more thoughtful experience of existence. The mysteries of the universe are made known through the "feminine." We are reminded here in Romero's use of the feminine sensibility as that most in touch with the mysteries of living as it parallels Anaya's vision of Ultima, la curandera, as the person with a special capacity for penetrating to the core of good and evil. We also see the parallels to Portillo's women who have an especially insightful relationship to life.

The importance Romero places upon the human being's capacity for possessing feminine endurance and hope can also be seen in the episode "Un Bandido." Diego Trujillo retreats into the calm and quiet of his hiding place in the mountains and spends the long winter months becoming accustomed to silence and to the presence of his own solitary being. Diego's winter stay in hiding becomes a spiritual hibernation period during which he discovers the value of human companionship. As he looks back upon his past life, Diego recalls its aimlessness. His time alone makes him see the value of genuine human contact. His change of heart, his wish to embrace life fully once his freedom is secure is embodied in his wish "to be close to the feminine counterpart that lay half dormant in his breast" (p. 139). Once he has decided he will take up life once again, Diego discovers in himself a new person: "In the summer light he saw his

face reflected in the stillness of a mountain pool...he saw a new Diego Trujillo. He was at peace, and his aura glowed like a radium timepiece; no, he would not be afraid to be gentle again" (p. 139). Diego is cleansed of his past aimless existence when he engages in a ritualistic cleansing, Thoreau-like bath in the mountain pool. And here also, he comes face-to-face with the "feminine counterpart" of his sensibility when he encounters the woman bathing on the other side of the pool. In their nakedness, they confront each other without fear or shame; in the couple's spontaneous act of sexual intercourse, Romero uses the love act as a metaphor for the intimate, almost mystical nature of human communication: "They laid on the sand at the stream's edge as if they had become part of the infinite number of grains that were the mystery of life. They loved with the heat and passion of sea salmon coming home to spawn. Unexplainably as the salmon, two strangers loved each other and were caught in the whirlpool of life; they didn't stop to speak or to doubt or to question, but flowed with the rhythm of the stream and followed it to its end which was the beginning" (p. 141).

Though "The Last Letter" is, on the surface, Mateo's farewell to the Gypsy, it is actually his bequest of the Gypsy to his descendants. He expresses fear that perhaps the Gypsy is doomed to die once he, Mateo, has died; he fears the Gypsy will die "if humanity has stopped dreaming" (p. 171). But Mateo allows that he will not think such

thoughts. The "worm of reality," (p. 171) he decides, will not devour the Gypsy's green eyes, and future generations will be able to "communicate with the earth and its surrounding stars" (p. 171). The sense in which Mateo bids farewell to the Gypsy lies in his anticipation of his own death. Just as his ancestors before him have done, Mateo hands down the tradition to his sons and anticipates his return to the earth of Nambe.

Orlando Romero's achievement in Nambe Year One represents an enlargement upon the theme of the search for selfhood and order because it offers what has been termed a vision of transcendence, one that goes beyond the limits of the personal, culturally defined sense of self. It is important to note, moreover, that Romero's character is able to transcend the culturally defined self--his ancestors as specifically defined Mexicans--only after he has recognized and embraced the self that his culture has enabled him to define. Ultimately, the culturally defined self becomes the gateway through which the individual is able to see herself and himself in relationship to all other selves that people the universe. Not only does the culture, the tradition play an important role in the discovery of the self; it is, indeed, indispensable precisely because of its richness and its affinities with that spirituality which underlies a vision of transcendence of the personal self. Thus, Mateo is able to perceive his "organic and cosmic place in Nature, the Gypsy, and the World" (p. 32) through his embracing of



the heritage left him by his ancestors which is a tradition that embraces a deeply spiritual view of life. The importance of the long historical, cultural tradition that is a product of the coming together of several races functioning as a gateway to a universal vision of spiritual existence is explained by the main character: "The Moor, the Jew, the Arab, Spanish and Indian blood force us to live by the law of nature and its mystical powers in the Sangre de Cristos, not by the laws made in the minds of men. We balance precariously on the peaks of the land and, distracted by the Gypsies, our physical and spiritual lives are prolonged and sensualized by our acceptance of them" (p. 19).

With regard to form, Romero has in Nambe Year One made little use of the traditional handling of plot and characterization. In this regard, Romero's work is a departure from the majority of the works under discussion in this study with the possible exception of Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra. Romero's purpose in Nambe Year One is to present a character's mental, spiritual search for meaning. Such a purpose allows him to make use of what is loosely termed a "Joycean" approach to narrative. That is, Romero makes use of the free flowing, almost structureless pattern of the conscious mind in the process of contemplation. Mateo Romero's consciousness which provides the point of view of the work moves freely from the past to the present, providing no chronological time sequence to the novel. The form, however, augments the work's purpose--to portray Mateo's

spiritual journey toward selfhood and an ordered vision of existence.

In its overall effectiveness, Nambe Year One represents a decidedly mature and sophisticated level of literary achievement. With regard to its place in the development of the quest for selfhood and order in Chicano prose fiction, it gives voice to a vision of the self that enlarges upon and refines the vision put forth in earlier works. By so doing, Nambe Year One represents a mature stage in the development of this particular theme. It brings to bear the critical importance of the Mexican American cultural heritage as it affects the modern day Chicano's struggle for selfhood. It is, finally, a thoughtful work that captures the complex and deeply spiritual nature of the struggle for selfhood and order which is taking place not only in the pages of fiction but in the lives of Mexican Americans today.

## Notes to Chapter VI

<sup>1</sup>Orlando Romero, Nambe Year One (Berkeley: Tonatiuh International, Inc., 1976), p. 168. All subsequent references are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Review of Nambe Year One by Orlando Romero, Choice (February 1977), p. 1559.

<sup>3</sup>Fray Angelico Chavez, Review of Nambe Year One, New Mexico Magazine (March 1977), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup>Review in Choice, p. 1559.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Writing in 1971 in "Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature," Philip D. Ortego defined the role of the Chicano novelist and artist in terms of the responsibility she or he has to stimulate Chicano readers to consider the direction and purpose of their lives: "...what makes the Chicano novelist particularly important at the moment is that as an artist he has been relegated the responsibility of galvanizing the efforts and aspirations of la raza toward the vision of a better way of life, a vision which oftentimes only the artist is privy to."<sup>1</sup> Ortego's view of the Mexican American artist as visionary has been borne out in the eight years since he observed that such writers as Jose Antonio Villarreal and Richard Vasquez, in attempting to picture the alienation and psychological trauma Chicanos were undergoing coming to terms with life in the United States, were presenting the need for more thoughtful and satisfying avenues toward arriving at meaningful existence. When we consider the direction Chicano fiction has taken since the appearance of Villarreal's and Vasquez's novels, we begin to see the formation of a vision that emphasizes confronting alienation instead of buckling under to it. This vision of confrontation becomes an important feature in understanding the way in which works such as Tomas Rivera's Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra/And The Earth Did Not Part began

to set the stage for presenting confrontation and resolution of alienation as a standard feature in the Mexican American character's search for the self in the prose fiction of the mid and later 1970's.

No longer does contemporary Chicano fiction show characters who like Richard Rubio decide to cast off nurturing along with unhealthy features in the Chicano cultural tradition. Neither are we presented with such characters as Sammy Sandoval who opt for drugs instead of confronting prejudice. What is being presented instead are characters such as Rivera's child hero who in casting off the confining, traditional view of God as all loving which has caused his parents, his people and himself to be passive victims of exploitation, freely defines himself instead of God as the master of his destiny. Likewise, we have the characters in Rudolfo Anaya's novels who come to embrace the past, the cultural tradition that helps them define themselves. Antonio Marez in his close relationship with Ultima, la curandera, symbol of the Mexican American tradition's capacity for goodness and wisdom, is able to recognize adult selfhood when he acknowledges both defiant adventurousness as well as quiet, dignified stability as harmonious features in his cultural past. Once Antonio sees that both sensibilities represented by Marez and Luna can be joined into one harmonious self and way of life, he achieves existential order. So also does Clemente Chavez find selfhood and order by confronting his cultural past. When he accepts the

ancient, mythological quest for Aztlan renewing itself in the modern day barrios of Barelmas, Clemente regains the spiritual fervor that guided the ancient peoples in search of their homeland of Aztlan. By identifying with and recapturing the spirit of unity with other Chicanos that Mexican cultural myths have to offer him, Clemente Chavez gains a new vision of himself as a leader of his people against oppression; he achieves selfhood and a subsequent ordered vision of life.

The features of confrontation and resolution lead eventually to the vision of transcendence in the Mexican American's quest for selfhood which involves going beyond the boundaries of the personal, individual self and culture to identify with the universal search for self and order. Estela Portillo's characters begin to step beyond their private selves when they see that all men and women have the capacity, indeed the responsibility, to live life with "ferocity," and that the one quest uniting all people resides in imposing order upon the "chaos" that the life cycle presents to each person. The feature of transcendence finds full expression in Mateo Romero's journey through his own ancestral traditions in Nambe to discover that the green-eyed wandering Gypsy is not only his legacy but everyone's inheritance. While Mateo knows that his ancestors--Moors, Spaniards, Gypsies, Indians and Mexicans--have been especially touched by the Gypsy's magic, the passionate response to life, Portillo's "ferocity," is all of humanity's bequest

to itself. Mateo thus transcends his private, cultural self to become identified with all women and men who find the Gypsy's magic irresistible. The important feature to see, moreover, is that Mateo comes to a wider vision of himself through identifying first with his cultural past.

Given the vision of transcendence that we see operating in very recent Mexican American fiction as Nambe Year One, we may logically ask: Will future Chicano literature eventually cease treating the Chicano experience as its central focus? Does this vision of universality mean that Chicano writers no longer value the self that is defined specifically within the context of the Chicano experience? Will there cease to be "Chicano literature" if writers present the need to identify with something larger than the Chicano experience? I answer these questions with a firm "no."

Future Chicano novels and short stories will continue making much use of the vision of transcendence--of the private self--because it contributes toward portraying the Chicano character and the Chicano experience as universal. In effect, with works such as Rain of Scorpions and Nambe Year One, we have already begun to see the Chicano as universal man and universal woman. Seen in this light, we may contend that Chicano writers have not only not veered away from presenting the importance of the Chicano experience, they have, indeed, amplified and extended its value by using it to represent the totality of human experience. In the hands of our most recent Chicano writers, the experience of growing

up Mexican American represents the human capacity for enduring alienation and suffering as well as confronting it, attaining selfhood and experiencing happiness, integration and order. As Mexican American fiction continues to develop, I believe we will see writers continuing to use Mexican American characters and themes as they illuminate broad areas of human experience. The Chicano cultural tradition contains an inexhaustably rich reservoir of myths, legends, and folklore that Chicano artists will be able to return to time and again for inspiration in creating their art. The legend of la llorona, for example, is simply too richly suggestive and capable of carrying symbolic meaning to be allowed to die from misuse. With its vast potential for providing materials for art, the Mexican American tradition is not in any danger, I believe, of being ignored by its artists.

Another striking and already visible development in Chicano fiction is the writer's view of herself and himself as interpreter of non-Chicano experience. This situation is not difficult to understand when we see it as a natural outgrowth of a writer's portraying the Mexican American character participating in a universal, human search for meaning. Estela Portillo's view of herself as interpreter of human experience and not just the Chicano experience is evident in Rain of Scorpions when she sketches Anglo characters such as Nan, the self-destructive woman who's been spurned by her husband, or the German Julio Otto Vass Schleifer who sees



the inhumanity of his father's "German" view of the Mexican earth and people. And other examples exist. Below the Summit, a novel by Joseph V. Torres-Metzger, published in 1977 by the Chicano publishing house, Tonatiuh International, has an Anglo as its main character. Robby Lee Cross is a Texas religious fanatic who degenerates into a psychotic killer and murders his Mexican wife, Maria Dolores. The Mexican American characters in Below the Summit are minor ones in terms of characterization though they are important because they contrast sharply with the quite negative portraits of bigoted, narrow-minded Anglo characters.

Despite the negative image of the Anglo in Below the Summit, it would be incorrect to say that the portrayal of the Anglo character by Mexican American writers will center only on exposing the Anglo's bias and prejudice toward Chicanos. I think, perhaps, that as the Chicano writer explores the complex make-up of the Chicano psyche he or she comes to understand, also, the variety and complexity of the non-Chicano psyche, whether it be Anglo, Black or Puerto Rican. The point is that Chicano writers, generally, have not in the past nor do I see them in the future settling for a one-sided view of all Anglos as bigoted or narrow-minded. I believe we can look forward in the future to seeing a variety of Anglo and other non-Chicano characters populating Mexican American novels and short stories. The Chicano writer is busy studying people and life, and we readers can expect to gauge the extent to which our writers have been

observers and participants in a wide variety of life's experiences by the depth with which they present not only the Chicano but the human experience. It seems this is a task we have the obligation to ask of our novelists and short story writers--that they penetrate, to the core, the variety of human experience.

The central focus of Chicano literature, nevertheless, will remain the Chicano; for, in the end, we ourselves are still what we find most interesting. I believe the Chicano character in fiction has come to terms with herself and himself; the long path from alienation to confrontation and resolution has been traversed, and the Chicano can now transcend it, can now place that personal self into a broad human perspective. But our time in Tomas Rivera's labyrinth has not come to an end. Though Chicano literature and Chicano fictional characters are not lost in tortuous and confusing pathways that make up the complex labyrinth of the Chicano self, there remain areas to be explored and understood. And the peace that comes from confronting alienation, attaining selfhood and realizing existential order should never be looked upon as a self-satisfying, complacent realization that implies a halt to searching out further regions of the self. Rather, like Clemente Chavez's realization of selfhood in Heart of Aztlan, this successfully completed quest implies that one gathers new incentive to act precisely because one now knows who she or he is. The peace that comes with arriving at selfhood and order is one

that allows the individual to place herself and himself in perspective in order to advance upon new and adventurous borders of experience that will enrich the total experience of life.

The complex, labyrinthine self that is the Mexican American needs further exploration by today's Chicano fiction writers. I refer specifically to the Mexican American woman character in fiction. More serious and thoughtful treatment of the Chicana needs to be undertaken by today's writers of Mexican American literature, the vast majority of whom are men. Estela Portillo has made the most important contribution in portraying the complexity of the female experience in certain selections in Rain of Scorpions. In addition, Portillo has made the female experience the center of her concern in other literary efforts such as in her play "Day of the Swallows." All in all, however, Chicano fiction needs to begin centering part of its attention upon discovering ways in which exposure to the feminine experience can add to an understanding of the total Chicano experience and to the total human experience. It would be even more thoughtful and authentic, too, if we could have more Mexican American women writers who would attempt to understand and present the experience of growing up Mexican American and female in the United States. Chicano literature could only be much more rich and stimulating if the feminine perspective were more visibly presented as a part of the total Chicano experience.

Our time in Rivera's labyrinth, then, will continue to be mirrored in the Chicano prose fiction of the 1980's. The quality of the quest, however, will not be the desperate and frenzied confusion that characterized Richard Rubio's early wanderings. The Chicano's continued search for meaning will encompass newer, wider and more complex areas of the self, and the quest will be characterized by the searcher's self-confident determination to seek out and understand the new borders of experience that the 1980's will undoubtedly bring for the Mexican American. Charles Tatum's analysis of the Chicano fiction of the 1970's as one whose main concern was "a farreaching exploration of the Chicano psyche"<sup>2</sup> will certainly hold true for Chicano fiction in the 1980's as well. The human passion for order that motivates "the metaphysical quest" will continue leading the Chicano writer and Chicano characters to meet the challenge the labyrinth has to offer--the challenge of unraveling each new layer of experience that makes up the evolving, complex Mexican American.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Philip D. Ortego, "Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature," Diss. University of New Mexico, 1971, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup>Charles M. Tatum, "Contemporary Chicano Prose Fiction: Its Ties to Mexican Literature," Books Abroad, 49, 435.

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