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Chicanismo: The Rebirth of a Spirit

Willard Gingerich
gingerichw@montclair.edu

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Review: CHICANISMO: THE REBIRTH OF A SPIRIT

Reviewed Work(s): The Road to Tamazunchale by Ron Arias

Review by: Willard Gingerich

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Reviews of Books

CHICANISMO: THE REBIRTH OF A SPIRIT

The Road to Tamazunchale. By Ron Arias. West Coast Poetry Review, Reno.
\$3.00.

"THE SKIN DREW TIGHT at the elbow. Slowly it began to rip, peeling from the muscle. No blood. The operation would be clean, like slipping off nylon hose. He always had trouble removing chicken skins, but this, he could see, would be easier." So are we introduced to old Fausto, the dying hero (yes, hero) of Ron Arias's first novel, peeling off his own liver-blotched skin with all the sacred nonchalance of an Aztec priest stripping himself of the stinking skin of a sacrificial offering to Xipe Totec. Fausto's maternalistic niece doesn't notice the folded skin he shows her: "She must be blind," Fausto thinks. Like the pre-Columbian serpent of wisdom, the old man puts off his mortality to begin taking on something else.

This masterful narrative is the account, pathetic, fantastic, glorious, and transcendent, of an old chicano's preparation for and passage into death, somewhere in the barrio of Los Angeles (the places are all there, but I don't know L.A.). It is and is not a passage to Tamazunchale, a very real "former Huastec capital, a tropical village" of Mexico, as a postscript from *Toor's New Guide to Mexico* informs us. The novel's title appears in the novel itself as the name of a makeshift play some impoverished barrio people improvise for their own entertainment in a broken-down theater. "You see," explains the MC, "whenever things go bad, whenever we don't like someone, whoever it is, . . . we simply send them to Tamazunchale. We've never really seen this place, but it sounds better than saying the other, if you know what I mean. . . . Everyone," he adds, "is on that road. Sí, compadres, everyone! But as you'll see, Tamazunchale is not what you think it is." And it never is. As Fausto tells a little girl who asks him in the play, "Are we going to die?" "No one dies in Tamazunchale." "No one?" "Well, some people do, but they're only pretending." And in the play's finale actors, audience (including one boy who really is from Tamazunchale), and all but Fausto march up a ramp from the stage and out into the stars.

Of course, it is all in the dying mind of Fausto, or in the dreams of the poverty-stricken wetbacks, or in the mind of Arias—or perhaps even in that fine fictive space which a whole generation of Latin novelists have reinvented, mastered, and recovered our belief in, a space where the names "realist," "surrealist," "fabulist," and "social historian" all meld into one: magician of

the imagination. The "boom" of fiction in Latin America has met little true understanding among the writers of the north, despite the best efforts of John Barth, but Arias has served a full apprenticeship with the best. Apropos of Borges, Fausto goes shopping with some friends to prepare for his death. He buys diaries, journals, crates of paperbacks, encyclopedias in five languages, a Nahua grammar, a set of Chinese classics, a few novels by a promising Bulgarian author, a collection of Japanese prints, an illustrated Time-Life series on nature (this is L.A., remember), an early cosmography of the known and unknown worlds, a treatise on the future of civilization in the Sea of Cortez, two coffee-table editions on native American foods, an anthology of uninvented myths, and three boxes of unwritten books. "But Tio, look, nothin's in them. It's all blank pages." ". . . I want these." "What for?" "Some people might want to write their own books. If I'm going to own a store, I want to have everything." Arias knows the irony and fantasy of García Marquez, the narrative devices of both Faulkner and Cortazar, the violence of Vargas Llosa, the visionary death-knowledge (essential to his entire plot) of Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes, and the indigenist magic-realism of Asturias. But this novel is in English, and Arias leaves no doubt of his acquaintance with the genre in that language.

He does not enclose himself in technique, however, and perhaps the surest sign of his promise is the ability to use technique as a lens, a scalpel, in laying bare the glory and desperation of the wetback, not as a social commentary but as a human paradigm. This is not a free-floating "fabulist" narrative of the avant-garde sort practiced about New York, for which Tom Wolfe has justly expressed little hope. It is a fable, but one which extends itself out of the roots of suffering and death, a fable of real human emotions, not limited to the exhausted formulas of "realism" or deformed by misapprehended techniques of new masters.

If Arias can be faulted in any major way, it is perhaps in his hesitation to trust the fictive imagination to its fullest. In his ambivalence between a rationalist reductio of all things fantastic to a function of Fausto's feverish brain chemistry, a realist reductio, and a commitment to the resonant mystery of Fausto as image of the imagination itself. If this ambivalence were calculated to pose the equivocal nature of death and experience themselves, it would provide additional levels of narrative harmony; but I don't believe Arias is working for that juxtaposition. When he implies, for example, that Fausto's trip to Cuzco has been a dream, it is clear that he means the "dream" of the psychologists, a quantity of psychic material which, with the correct rational terminology, may be shown to originate into conscious, linear, every-

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to Anchorage, Alaska, in 1972. Her poems and articles of literary criticism have been published in a number of journals. MARJORIE HAWKSWORTH, on the other hand, moved to California from the East Coast. She received the B.A. from Barnard College and has done graduate work at the University of California. She lives in Santa Barbara, where she teaches creative writing. BILL WHALEY lives in Taos, New Mexico, and is the owner of the Taos Plaza Theatre.

MICHAEL KULYCKY has appeared once before in our pages, in the Spring 1974 issue. At that time, however, he was using a different version of his name—michael K. Indexers take note: *This is the same person!* He lives in Evanston, Illinois, and teaches English at Thornton Community College. About being a poet, he writes us: "An artist does not have to balance cost of production against performance, or compromise materials in order to enhance profitability. In the domain of one's private penchant, there is no limit to the perfectibility one dares to strive for."

FREDERIC WILL has been with us twice before, in the Autumn 1963 and Summer 1972 issues. He lives in Amherst and teaches in the comparative literature department at the University of Massachusetts. His poem in this issue will be included in a collection of his poems, *Epics*, to be published later this summer by the Panache Press. The Indian teacher of whom he writes belongs to the Tama tribe, located, he tells us, in "a small broken-down reservation about forty miles west of Iowa City, Iowa. They are a branch of the Sac and Fox." MARGARET SHIPLEY has also contributed two poems to earlier issues, those of Spring 1964 and Summer 1967. She lives in Boulder, Colorado, and is editor of the Colorado Associated University Press.

This is RICHARD FROST's fourth SWR appearance, after quite a hiatus, his previous appearances having been in the Spring 1963 and Winter and Spring 1966 issues. When we asked him what had been happening in his writing life in the interim, he replied, "For one thing, I married a poet"—and most of the rest of his letter is happily concerned with her publishing successes, although he does mention several prestigious places in which his own poems are appearing. He is the author of two books of poems, *The Circus Villains* and *Getting Drunk with the Birds*.

Reviews of Books

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day experience. But, on the other hand, the quality itself of that narrative event reveals Arias's awareness of an ineffable otherness within Fausto's dream, providing a surpassing escape from self, psychology, and even death, an escape which is the figure of Arias's own dream of imagination in which

Fausto is artist, and hence reader. Arias equivocates, in other words, between a conviction of the rational "Thomas and Charlie," as one character calls the mythic Mexican town, and the true Tamazunchale of liberated fictive imagination.

Tamazunchale is a serious critique of the infra-culture which has consumed Fausto (one of his last acts is to lead a ragtag band of wetbacks into the interior to food and shelter), but only by reflection. It is not Fausto's experience of oppression which lends him finally a social and moral transcendence; it is a chicanismo of spirit, having nothing to do with race, which finally liberates his imagination to swallow up the Santa Monica Freeway, the A&P shopping carts, and the black Chevies with glass-packs. Tomás Rivera, in a foreword to *Tamazunchale*, says:

Chicanismo to me represents the rebirth of a spirit which now . . . begins to manifest itself in different forms. . . . I believe that the most important thing for art and literature is to liberate itself from dogmas and to express freely not only the suffering, the injustice, but rather the totality of the chicano. We have always been complete people and now that we search the abstract, imagined, forms to represent this reality, we need to represent and make concrete every angle and side of the chicano. Our intent in literature, then, has to be totally human.

Rivera believes, and he is correct, that Arias has achieved that intent at the very introduction of his career. But there is a further dimension to the chicanismo of this book, a dimension which occurs as function of its antecedents and its accomplishment, both well beyond the concerns of ethnic or political identity. There is at this point in the literary history of North America no consciousness more resonantly symbolic of all its fiction could become than the liberated chicano consciousness. Combining all the currents of indigenous, colonia (Spanish and Anglo), and modern Yankee identities into one being, it appropriates all that is American in experience for itself, free to move at will among genres, languages, and techniques (in one of the richest literary geographies in the world) and feels no obligation to reject anything by reason of blood or tradition. In this first work, Arias shows the promise of such a consciousness.

The indigenous permeates the narrative, from its epigram (taken from one of the Nahuatl poems of King Nezahualcoyotl) to the last rest of Fausto in the lap of his already dead wife, primarily in the form of a Peruvian named Marcelino who first insinuates himself into the story only as the distant sound of a flute in Fausto's mind. When Marcelino appears, he is a herder of alpaca, leading his animals right up onto the freeway in the midst of a funeral procession. In his poncho and flop-eared cap, he wanders in and out of Fausto's L.A., at one point revealing a secret cure for all sick-

ness: he tells Fausto to build a small pile of stones as high as he can. "Then, and this is the hardest part, . . . if you truly believe you can, you place one more stone on top. If it stays and does not fall, you will be as strong as that last stone. Nothing can make you fall." Together the old chicano and the Peruvian herder wander through a movie set in what must be one of the finest echoes of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in contemporary fiction.

It is Fausto himself who takes the burden of Spanish consciousness, the second quotient of chicano imagination, playing (and being) conqueror of Peru and acting the picaro for this entire improbable adventure. The yankee figure is a sleek, young, goateed "vato" named Mario who picks up Fausto on a bus because he thinks the old man will make a good distraction while he filches radios, jewelry, or "anything he can fit under his jacket." Mario has completely absorbed Emerson's lamented sense of "commodity" and Jay Gatsby's lust for success. He vows he will not end up like his father who couldn't wait to die, "cause I ain't gonna work." In a stolen car they cruise in and out of trouble and reality.

The reviewer for *Plural*, Mexico's most prestigious literary journal, called Fausto a "Don Quixote of the wetbacks," and one cannot imagine a better term to describe the irony, pathos, gnarled idealism, wryness, and glorification of this broken-down senior citizen of the L.A. suburbs. This novel is more than the completion of an apprenticeship, and the novelist who can fulfill its promise will be one to reckon with in the broadest spectrum of American fiction.

Willard Gingerich

SOUTHWEST CHRONICLE

Broadcloth and Britches: The Santa Fe Trade. By Seymour V. Connor and Jimmy M. Skaggs. Texas A&M University Press, College Station. \$10.95.

Early Texas Oil: A Photographic History, 1866-1936. By Walter Rundell, Jr. Texas A&M University Press, College Station. \$19.50.

The Trader on the American Frontier: Myth's Victim. By Howard R. Lamar. Texas A&M University Press, College Station. \$5.00.

Hamlin Garland's Observations on the American Indian, 1895-1905. Compiled and edited by Lonnie E. Underhill and Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. Cloth \$9.95. Paper \$4.95.

Cavalry Wife: The Diary of Eveline M. Alexander, 1866-1867. Edited with an introduction by Sandra L. Myres. Texas A&M University Press, College Station. \$10.00.