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I HAVE NOT SINNED – TONY'S QUEST FOR WISDOM
IN *BLESS ME, ULTIMA* BY RUDOLFO ANAYA

Chicano literature as a remarkable body of writing is relatively young having taken a distinctive shape in the generation after the end of the Mexican War in 1848 and becoming the emerging voice of the Latin American ethnic minority only in the decade of 1980s. Yet, the cultural forces that gave rise to Chicano literature date from the late 16th century when the Spanish *conquistadores* began their colonization and exploration of what is now the southwestern United States. Consequently, the literature of the Spanish-speaking Southwest reflected a harsh borderland environment marked by episodes of intense cultural conflict, first with Native Americans and later with Anglo-Americans. This frontier culture produced such literary forms as personal and historical narratives which captured the experience of the conquest and settlement; occasional and religious poetry and oral folk dramas, which were adaptations of traditional Spanish plays adjusted to the particular circumstances of the Southwest. Much of this literature used traditional Mexican myths and legends, the best example being the figure of La Llorona (the weeping woman), one of Mexico's best-known legends which became an inspiration for any number of Chicano works of fiction.

Until the mid-nineteenth century both oral and written literature of the Spanish-speaking Southwest was not remarkably different from that created in the Mexican heartland. Southwest Mexicans knew about cultural events and styles not only in central Mexico, but in Spain and other parts of Europe as well, and used that knowledge for their literary activity. Nevertheless, much as the Mexican Southwest managed to maintain cultural ties with the Mexican interior, it was also developing ever-stronger connections with the United States. By 1836, for example, Mexicans in Texas found themselves outnumbered by Anglos and in California the Mexican residents were frequently visited by American trading ships and a number of American *gringos* stayed and married into *californio* families.

The turning point in the history of the Mexican Southwest came in 1848, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended two-year war between Mexico and the United States and ratified the relinquishment of nearly half of Mexico's land. The vast majority of Mexican residents were transformed into Mexican Americans, but not American citizens, with a stroke of a pen. Since that moment the trajectory of Mexican culture in the Southwest has shifted and the process of Americanization has begun. The literature of that period reflected culture in transition with the impact on the threat to Catholicism posed by Anglo Protestantism and the decline of the Spanish language. Literature became instrument of political activism.

Consequently, oral expression became more prominent in Mexican American culture, especially the *corrido*, a Mexican ballad form related to Spanish romance, which served a function similar to that of the blues in African American community. In tactics similar to the linguistic coding of the blues, which protected the singers from the censure and retaliation of whites, *corridos* were composed in Spanish safe from most Anglos' comprehension. By 1900 Mexican American literature emerged as a distinctive part of the literary culture of the United States. Yet, its origins were Spanish and Mexican, its primary language Spanish and its religious sensibility Catholic, so despite political dependence of the region on the US government, it remained within the orbit of Latin American letters and oral tradition.

This situation remained unchanged up to 1945 when Josephina Niggli published *Mexican Village*, the first literary work by a Mexican American to reach the general American audience. This remarkable novel was intended to convey to American readers the distinctiveness of Chicano experience and expression. Although the *Mexican Village* is composed in English, being abundant in Mexican legends, folktales and proverbs it still feels like Spanish.

It was World War II that accelerated the process of Mexican American acculturation. The War stimulated the movement of Chicano population into large cities where military industries offered well-paid labor. Also the high level of Mexican American participation in the army significantly reduced cultural isolation. Nonetheless, like other forms of ethnic expression *chicanismo* received a real boost from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Several Chicano publishing houses were created around this time, most notably Quinto Sol of Berkley, the publisher of Rudolfo Anaya's award winning novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972).

Rudolfo Anaya, probably the best-known Chicano writer, was born on October 30, 1937, to Rafaelita Mares and Martin Anaya as the fifth offspring in a family of seven children. He began his life in a small village Pastura in New Mexico. His mother's lineage comes from *llano* (farmers)

and his father is a *vaquero* (cowboy). These two lifestyles differ apparently, the fact that influenced both young Rudolfo and his future literary characters. Rudolfo and his siblings were raised in a devout Catholic home. Yet, he was also raised in the tradition of old Mexican myths and folktales passed to him by his grandmother, La Grande, who was a *curandera* (a folk healer). At home he spoke Spanish and therefore became bilingual. He attended school in Santa Rosa and Albuquerque and later enrolled at the University of New Mexico where he earned degrees in English, guidance and counseling. After graduating from the University he accepted a teaching position in a small town and started writing.

His first and most important novel *Bless Me, Ultima* took seven years to write. It was first published by *El Grito* (a Chicano magazine) in 1972 and the same year Anaya was awarded a prestigious Premio Quinto Sol Award. *Bless Me, Ultima* is one of Chicano literature's most important coming-of-age novels. It captures the magic of child's innocence and the loss of it through the story of Antonio's relationship with the *curandera* named Ultima. The novel also touches upon the impact of World War II on a small community in New Mexico, which is left isolated by the participation of its young men in the war. Anaya, like Leslie Marmon Silko and many other writers of this generation and ancestry, explores the theme of the influence of a sudden acceptance of ethnic minorities by the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture brought by the necessity of the war. Nevertheless, *Bless Me, Ultima*, is not only a novel about the loss of innocence and acculturation problems in an attempt to correlate two different attitudes to life and religion, but it is also a story about acquiring wisdom and learning how to forgive.

At the beginning of the novel Antonio, the main character, is almost seven, yet, he seems more experienced than other children of his age. In fact, his problems seem to reflect much of Anaya's own life's doubts and questions. Tony is torn between his mother's wish for him to become a priest and settle down among farmers, where she comes from, and his father's, a cowboy, dream of moving to California to run a rancho with the help of his sons. Once La Grande, a *curandera* from Las Pasturas, named Ultima, comes to live with them Tony begins to mature.

For some Ultima (her name meaning 'the last') is just a folk healer, a person with the knowledge of the curing power of herbs and a storyteller; for others she represents the pagan faith in witchcraft and supernaturalism, which in the Southwest differs from that in other parts of the United States. Southwest beliefs in *brujas* (witches) and their magic (*curanderismo*) are greatly influenced by both Catholicism and the ancient religions of the Native Americans of this part of the country, which intermingle creating the intriguing history of the Chicanos full of magical tales.

Subsequently, Ultima teaches Tony not only *curanderismo* practices but also how to unite traditional Chicano beliefs with the Catholic religion of his mother and with reality he faces at school. As soon as he learns from her that his spirit shares in the spirits of all things he starts to notice the beauty of nature, people and his country. However, the more knowledge he possesses the more questions and doubts concerning his cultural heritage arise.

The first sign of his skepticism appears after the night his father witnessed the murder of Lupito, a crazy ex-soldier, committed by the village people and the following morning he goes to the mass and takes the communion with the rest of the family. Tony, who believes in absolute innocence, cannot accept that his father may expect God to forgive him for not trying to stop the angered mob. Then Ultima teaches him his first lesson "never to judge who God forgives and who He doesn't" (33). Although at this point Tony is unaware of the importance of these words, since that moment he inevitably starts his way to understanding God's kingdom of love and mercy. It is a hard task for him as being brought up in the Chicano culture he perceives God as powerful and extremely severe, contrary to Virgin Mary, whom he sees as graceful, and "full of quiet and peaceful love and forgiveness" (44), just as his mother.

Tony's bond with his mother is very strong. She expects him to become a "man of learning" and Tony being curious and striving for knowledge shares this dream with her. When he goes to school for the first time, it is an important experience for both of them. Yet, at school Tony suddenly finds out that he is an outcast among the children. He is different from them and they, realizing it, do not want to accept his individuality, but they laugh at him instead. That first day at school Tony experiences "la triesta de la vida" (sadness of life 59) for the first time and begins the painful process of growing up.

Moreover, when his brothers come back from the war changed and refuse to pursue their parents' dreams, soon disappearing from the town, even more expectations are placed on Tony. Those expectations are a heavy burden for a seven-year-old child and result in an emotional split and even more doubts.

The only kid who seems to understand Tony is Samuel who once tells him a story of "the people," who fished and ate carp, the only thing that their gods did not allow them to do. Thus sinning against their will they exposed themselves to the gods' anger and punishment. This legend sounds exactly like the story of Adam and Eve, eating the forbidden fruit and thus sentencing the whole human race to the loss of Paradise. However, at that moment Tony does not know that, he says, "I had never heard a story like this one" (80), which both scares and fascinates him. He does

not realize that the Golden Carp, a forgiving god, who pitied the sinful people and sacrificed himself to save them, can be just another representation of Jesus Christ. Instead, he feels that the "roots of everything he had ever believed in seemed shaken" (81). Not understanding what he has experienced and living with the constant awareness of punishment, he is afraid that his whole family will be doomed for praying to the wrong God. Through the Golden Carp story Anaya wonderfully illustrates the intermingling of local folktales with the religion of the *conquistadores*, whereas Tony's reaction to this tale reflects an attitude of the person who has not yet grown up to apprehend his cultural lineage.

When Uncle Lucas gets ill and neither a doctor nor a priest can help him Tony is exposed to another ordeal of faith. It is Ultima and her magic that help "against the evil of the brujas" (85) and their spell, which causes even more confusion in Tony's religious quest. He is anxious about the priest's inability to act against the power of the witches, and if he is to become a priest how he could cope with such magic without being terrified by it. Then Ultima teaches him another lesson by telling him that, "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" (98). As at that point Tony still needs to question and learn he keeps wondering whether there is "more power in Ultima's magic than in the priest's" (99).

Simultaneously Cico appears to take him to a magic place, Chicano folktales being abundant in magic places and figures, and shows him the legendary Golden Carp. Whether this event, which resembles Christ's temptation, is a pagan experience or the next step to Tony's understanding of the nature of the Divine Being, we still do not know. We even do not know if Cico is a real person or just the product of Tony's imagination, as the only people aware of Cico's presence are Tony and Ultima, characters of rather limited credibility as far as the edge between reality and fantasy is concerned. Nonetheless, the seemingly truthful apparition of the pagan god overwhelms Tony with its beauty, who although scared of breaking the First Commandment, asked by Cico admits that he believes in the Golden Carp, but at the same time he "has to believe in Him (pointing to the Church)" (107). This event also teaches him that good is always accompanied by evil, just as the Golden Carp is accompanied by the black bass. Moreover, he notices that Cico's pagan philosophy of "sin against no one" (119) resembles his mother's religious teachings, with the exception that unlike Cico, Tony in his naïve attitude still believes in a complete innocence of human race. Thus he is petrified by Cico's vision of flooding his home town by waters surrounding it when human sins become unbearable. Tony immediately wants to go and warn the people but being only a child

he is convinced that nobody would listen to him. People seem to have long forgotten Jesus' words: "unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Bible, Mathew 34), and Tony, who has not learnt the catechism yet, is still unaware of his enormous power.

Nonetheless, Tony's perception of the surrounding world and people is slowly changing and he realizes that "the more he knows about people, the more he knows about the strange magic hidden in their hearts" (109). Cico calls Tony a fisherman, which suggests the Christian notion of Christ's disciples being fishermen of human souls, and reflects his mother's wish of having a priest son. During his second school year Tony makes friends with Red, a Protestant, and Florence, an atheist, which is another step to Tony's knowledge and acceptance of diversity.

Moreover, Tony, having seen Lupito's death and Ultima's magic, then witnessing the apparition of the pagan god and finally seeing his brother, Andrew, with the prostitutes, starts to doubt his own innocence. Listening to the dying Narciso's confession and Act of Contrition has a critical effect on Tony's mind. He gets so ill that even Ultima's *curanderismo* cannot help him in his fight for life. Unconscious, at the verge of death, he has visions in which he asks God for forgiveness for Andrew but the God answers "I am not a God of forgiveness" (173). When Tony keeps asking, God agrees under the condition that Tony forgives Tenorio, Narciso's murderer, but this wish is something Tony still cannot accept. He has not learnt yet that in order to be absolved we must learn to forgive our enemies as well. He is even more confused when he hears Virgin Mary who offers her forgiveness to Tenorio because she is the one who "forgives all" (173). When Tony, blinded by his reasonableness, still wants punishment for Tenorio, God laughs at him and explains that there cannot be both: God who forgives all and God who punishes. In his dream, Tony finally understands that he has sinned by doubting God's wisdom and mercy and wakes up weak but healthy. Yet, in real life he is not able to use this knowledge. He goes to Church and prays to Virgin Mary for enlightenment but God always "would shake His head and answer, the boy is not yet ready to understand" (187).

Also the teaching Tony gets during the catechism lessons, which are to prepare him for the Holy Communion, does not correspond with the vivid discussions, he carries on with Florence, about the nature of God, sin, repentance for sins and existence of hell. These discussions again challenge Tony's faith as he sees much logic in Florence's atheist argumentation. As a result of them, Tony starts to wonder whether God keeps testing people's faith and punishing them for their desire of knowledge, and consequently whether he is going to be punished as well.

When Easter Saturday comes Tony is going to experience his first confession but before that, he undergoes the ultimate trial. As all children know that he is going to become a priest they want him to practice confession with them. Nevertheless, they make a cruel game of it, making Florence kneel before Tony and confess. When Florence denies having committed any sins they beat him to compel him to talk. At first Tony tries to help his friend by persuading him to reveal just one sin in order to satisfy the merciless companions, but Florence persists that he is without a sin. Suddenly, Tony realizes that Florence is telling the truth, even when he challenges Tony by claiming that it was God who sinned against him. Other children are terrified by such a blasphemy and they demand penance for Florence, but at that very moment Tony is given the understanding God has promised him and he offers forgiveness to Florence. He says, "there will be no punishment, there will be no penance! His sins are forgiven!" (214), and he blesses Florence. Disappointed children decide that Tony is a bad priest and they beat him instead, but Tony knows that not only did he forgive Florence, but first of all he excused himself for his doubts and questions thus becoming fully aware of the complexity of his cultural ancestry and identity. He had absolved Florence, as he understood that, different as they may seem in their attitudes towards tradition and religion, in fact, they are the same. They both experience the same uncertainties and problems, condemnation and judgment of which do not belong to them but to the Supreme Being, whatever name can be attributed to it. Hence Tony understood and fulfilled Jesus' words: "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Mathew 11). He showed mercy and knows that his sacrifice will satisfy his God, as it is exactly what God had expected him to do. At that point Tony has almost reached the end of his journey.

Tony eventually completes his quest in finding the wisdom he was looking for at Ultima's deathbed, when she says, "I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio. Always have 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 shall be with you" (261). As these last words of hers sound exactly like some other words uttered two thousand years ago: "Teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen" (Mathew 61). Tony knows that he has finally understood his God.

To understand this correspondence one must again remember the complex role religion plays within Latin American culture, in which issues of Christianity synchronize with the beliefs of different indigenous races, present at one point or another in the history of Latin America. This parallelism of Catholic belief in the omniscient presence of God in human

life with Ultima's promise to stand by Tony forever represents the intensity with which indigenous sense of mysticism in Chicano culture, which Ultima symbolizes, intermingles with the religion brought by *conquistadores*. Anaya's novel proves that, being under the control of European Conquerors and Catholicism they brought, Indian tribes struggled to preserve their spirituality alive and as pure as possible. The main reasons that made it possible were numerous intermarriages between the Spaniards and the indigenous population that led to the creation of a new race, *mestizo* or Chicano, the product of which is Tony, but also the persistence of local storytellers and *curanderas*, like Ultima, who kept myths and legends alive. The wisdom Tony has gained reflects all Chicanos' ethnic need to maintain their cultural diversity while reaching out to other communities and traditions.

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