

RESCUING THE PAST WITH A DIFFERENCE: NOSTALGIA IN CHICANO POETRY

In 1967 Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzales' programmatic poem "Yo soy Joaquín / I Am Joaquín"¹ tried

to create in the Chicano reader's mind a sense of historical continuity and a longing for historical and spiritual roots by tracing them to pre-Columbian times...to rescue the past from oblivion, to raise the Chicanos' historical sense of their past, to instill a sense of veneration for selected facets of the Mexican heritage, and to give pride in the Chicano's combined cultural origin.²

It also directly appealed to Chicano writers to support these efforts. The terminology used suggests that something affirmative had to be created or recreated because something worth retaining had evidently been lost or repressed. A survey of the literature of the Chicano Renaissance responding to this call for action tells us that such efforts involve a certain danger of establishing a nostalgic vision as long as the forgotten or undervalued past is conjured up for the sole purpose of rescuing something no longer easily obtainable though still retrievable by deliberate individual acts of memory in order to depict and, at the same time, lament something singular, something different but fairly unproductive for the present, lacking universal significance. On the other hand, when trying to expand very specific, unexchangeable materials into something more comprehensive, the author risks a thinning out of roots, a relapse into cultural invisibility. The ideal combination would certainly be a work of art with universal meaning but also preserving such quality of texture and background that it could not have been written in any other

place or by anyone else than a native"³ without falling into the trap of the melancholic "longing for something far away and long ago."⁴

In a number of poems written during what Cordelia Candelaria termed the first three phases of Chicano poetry⁵ on the barrio childhood and youth, the threat of a merely nostalgic portrayal of the individual experience through memory urged poets to give their raw materials an extra perspective, an extra tone or an extra meaning linking the past to be rescued with actuality. This can be demonstrated by close readings of Raúl Salinas' "A Trip Through the Mind Jail" (1970)⁶, Alurista's "en el barrio"(1971)⁷, Tino Villanueva's "Jugábamos/We Played"(1972)⁸ and Gary Soto's "Braly Street"(1977)⁹.

A fine example of the nostalgic rendering with a purpose, with a final application of what Saul Bellow called the writer's 'lifting power'¹⁰ is Raúl Salinas' evocation of his barrio, Austin's La Loma, in his "A Trip Through the Mind Jail". The poem's title, its dedication, the concluding lines and the final statement of its date and place of composition set the depiction of a neighborhood into a particular perspective and expand its meaning considerably. The dedication to Eldridge Cleaver serves as a deliberate and simple act of solidarity towards another person victimized by the authorities and institutions of the dominant society, who after a long prison record left his country for Algeria in 1969, the year the Salinas poem was written in a prison cell of Leavenworth Penitentiary. In the final lines the speaker rejects the identity or rather, the non-identity superimposed upon him by the mainstream through his self-determined recreation of a distinct past as captivated in his "mind jail". This existential need to escape the present does not control the selection of barrio segments but it clearly influences the general tone of intimacy and relief. Negative details or those which could serve as an explanation for the present situation are part and parcel of the evocation. But they remain subordinated so as not to impair the necessarily self-defensive nostalgic vision of a newly-acquired territory and property:

For me: Only the NOW of THIS journey is REAL!
 Neighborhood of my adolescence
 neighborhood that is no more
YOU ARE TORN PIECES OF MY FLESH!!!
 Therefore, you ARE.
LA LOMA...AUSTIN...MY BARRIO
 i bear you no grudge
 i needed you then...identity...a sense of belonging
 i need you now.
 So essential to adult days of imprisonment,
 you keep me away from INSANITY's hungry jaws ;
 Smiling/Laughing/Crying.

At the end of the poem the 'lyrical I' invites all the barrio people still unaware of the rich potential of their heritage to share the poem and

its strategies to fight oppression, to create identity and pride, allowing "the author, and his readers, to reestablish a sense of belonging and place in the world."¹¹ The late Dieter Herms called this the final step from the emotionalization of the barrio to its universalization¹²:

Flats, Los Marcos, Maravilla, Calle Guadalupe, Magnolia,
Buena Vista, Mateo, La Seis, Chiquis, El Sur and all
Chicano neighborhoods that now exist and once
existed; somewhere....., someone remembers...

Some lines earlier Salinas already introduced us to the ritualistic and social function of this text¹³ by stressing that his memory and the power of the word rescue the barrio people from oblivion, thus providing survival, identity and continuity as asked for in *I Am Joaquín*¹⁴:

Neighborhood of my childhood
neighborhood that no longer exists
some died young -fortunate- some rot in prisons
the rest drifted away to be conjured up
in minds of others like them.

Alurista's poem "en el barrio", published one year after "A Trip Through the Mind Jail", describes an adolescent group growing out of the environment of its childhood days¹⁵, leaving behind a closed world of poverty but also of instinctive security and mutual dependence for the vague promises of a territory yet unexplored. The rendering of the two worlds is qualitatively and quantitatively highly uneven as e.g. the concluding seven lines in their imagery strongly rely on the fourteen preceding ones. The ironical imitation of the adolescents' rhetoric does not contradict the poet's basic recognition of the inevitability of this process though he places himself into the superior position of the keeper of the values of a particular time and place which remain formative, though yet unacknowledged by the group, as is indicated by the continuity of the imagery. "en el barrio" keeps up a plaintive note to its end and pleads for the rescuing of the past through memory as an essential part of one's identity. It questions the irrational mobility of the body and the mind. By introducing this evaluation indirectly, mainly through explicit modes of presentation, Alurista moves his poem beyond a limited nostalgic evocation of a lost world.

Tino Villanueva uses different strategies to give "Jugábamos/We Played" (1972) deeper meaning. His method can be classified as a combination of the Salinas and Alurista techniques. Not unlike Salinas, Villanueva frames his poem with two dedicatory mottoes and a final tying up in time and space. Paris, September 2, 1972 pinpoints the poem to one day, qualifying the act of composition as a fairly spontaneous one and the poem as an immediate product of thinking and feeling conceived locally and chronologically far from the original events¹⁶. The poetics of

the text is further emphasized by the two quotes from Alurista and Dylan Thomas, the Chicano and the Welshman apparently linked by their preoccupation with the past and memory. Villanueva uses only the first all-positive section of "en el barrio" as a starting point for his re-immersion into his own childhood preserved in his mind as a period of innocent play. Dylan Thomas' statement, "The memories of childhood have no order, and no end." hinting at the impossibility of keeping the memorizing process in check contradicts the preceding quote as Alurista, after all, imposed some order and some limits on his materials. The validity of the second motto is also challenged by Villanueva's deliberate separation of the nostalgic part of Alurista's poem from its concluding lines which, as we have seen, expanded its overall meaning considerably. Of course, we could also say that the interaction of the two mottoes can also take the responsibility for a potentially nostalgic poem from the author's shoulders as his influence can only be ephemeral.

The subsequent poem "Jugábamos/We Played" obviously displays the poet's craft of structuring experience which by its nature strongly resists such attempts as demonstrated again in the final two lines taking up the first two lines, thus indicating an ongoing process of endless cyclical repetition:

jugábamos/saltábamos/
jugábamos a todo.

The most visible and audible device used to portion out the childhood memories is the repetition of the title formula extended by various complementary rhyming phrases. Unity within the individual scenes welling up in the poet's mind and within the whole poem is established and preserved by the tension between the nostalgic ingredients and the ironic detachment of the adult looking back and giving shape, interpreting but constantly on the verge of being carried away emotionally. Tino Villanueva himself said that "the rhythm of the poem is this happy, lilting movement that I want in the poem"¹⁷. Again and again paraphrases and echoes of the Alurista' poem and its mood recur whenever this temptation becomes strongest: the marbles, the various shades of light, "las tardes de fuego", the late afternoons, "las calles polvorosas", the day games becoming night games or "the towering twilight". Very frequently the highly intellectual imagery introduced by Villanueva returns us to the rational aspect of the process of reconstruction, rescuing and evaluation of the past under way.

The final lines comment on that part of Alurista's poem neglected so far:

such were the times of year-rounded yearnings
when at the end of the light's flight i listened in
reflective boyhood silence.

then the day-done sun glistened, burned deeply,
disappearing into my eyes blinking: innocently
i blinked toward the towering twilight.

jugábamos/saltábamos/
jugábamos a todo.

The exuberance of Alurista's adolescents storming into another territory for conquest has gone; but also Alurista's irony which Villanueva used as a shield against the temptations of nostalgia in the main part of his poem. Villanueva's child like the adult narrator in Paris concludes his day in a reflective mood, internalizing the experience made in bright daylight without really being able to figure out what it means for the twilight and for the pending night. The adventurous mind which drove Alurista's protagonists from the scene of their childhood has had its day in Villanueva's poem earlier on, eagerly controlled by the ironic voice of the narrator and the structuring devices applied. In Villanueva's final lines the notion of innocence is still available as set against something huge looming in the future. But an instinctive, indistinct sense of loss overcomes the boy every evening thus foreshadowing the adult perspective from which the childhood memories can eventually be manipulated but not fully domesticated.

Villanueva's intertextual frame of reference builds up a contrast to a previously published poem by undermining its own nostalgic scenes right at the moment of their emergence, thus preventing them from settling down in the narrator's and the reader's mind like Alurista's singular and self-sufficient image of the children at play does, at least for a while. In a way, Villanueva turns Alurista's approach upside down. "Jugábamos/We Played" also substantially extends the meaning of Dylan Thomas' statement by stressing the poet's ability to give some degree of permanence and order to the flux of experience. At the same time his 'lyrical I' remains closer than Alurista's to what he recalls as he seems to be still struggling with the meaning of the materials remembered and the memorizing process itself. The past has been rescued by this creative poetic effort, the nostalgic vision has been avoided by preserving the inherent tensions, ambiguities and contradictions in the poem.

Let us bridge the gap of five years between Villanueva's and Gary Soto's poems. At the beginning of the first stanza of "Braly Street"(1977) the objects of Braly Street as it is now, dominate. Significantly enough the dead people determine the status of the objects and not vice versa. This pattern is apparently broken up when the narrator in a regular seasonal ritual actually returns to the scene of his childhood in a multi-ethnic neighborhood.¹⁸ The bleak catalogue of test results does not allow any nostalgic emotions to emerge. After measuring the distance to his childhood days in the first lines of stanzas two and three, fragments of former human activities are one after the other buried mainly through the work of the elementary powers. The narrator registers nature's utter

indifference to all human efforts in a tone of cynical consent. This typical attitude concludes the third stanza:

The houses are gone,
 The Molinas, Morenos,
 The Japanese families
 Are gone, the Okies gone
 Who moved out at night
 Under a canopy of
 Moving stars.

Once again, the objects come first, and the parallelism established in the end is quite unproductive. When the poem proceeds to more particular scenes in the fourth stanza, the mood becomes even more pessimistic and cynical ending in a vain gesture: "...I knelt and did not understand".

The final stanza dedicated to what Braly Street is now, brings about no fundamental change of attitude. The neighborhood has been turned into the waste land of an industrial park. The last witness of the childhood scenery remains an object mocking the spectator's wish for an insight:

To the Chinaberry
 Not pulled down
 And to its rings
 My father and uncle
 Would equal, if alive.

The poem certainly asks himself: Why does the narrator keep coming back to this place? We can only suspect that he observes a common custom which is supposed to trigger off some kind of profitable self-reflection and re-identification. However, the messages sent out by the objects underline the vanity and transitoriness of human endeavours, the meaninglessness of suffering, the inevitability of growth and death. Most of these truths explicitly contradict the concepts on which the call for a rescue operation for a distinct Chicano past and the creation of continuity was based. So we really should not be too surprised about the fact that a poem telling us the postmodern truth that nothing, or not much was revealed is no longer sustained by a particular ethnic experience. Soto's reduction of the interrelationship between past and present to an irrelevant minimum pushes the ethnic elements to the fringe or even out of the text.

To return to my initial ideas on the thinning out of roots whenever the work of art tries to avoid the pitfalls of nostalgia and strives for universal meanings too vehemently seem to confirm themselves in "Braly Street" which, on top of that, supports an ideology which denies

any chance of success to a rescue operation. The question is, by which arguments would we justify the inclusion of such a poem in an anthology of Chicano writing or ethnic literature? Does a poem like "Braly Street" blur all the distinctions characterizing ethnic literatures? So, do we need nostalgia, not really straight but with only some universal dilution?

A very smart and elegant solution to this dilemma is offered by a more recent, still unpublished poem, Marcella L. García's "pura mentira"¹⁹. The poet selected a topic used as frequently as the barrio as a major reference sphere to all kinds of efforts of creating identity and continuity in the seventies. García focusses on the relationship with the old folk. And like Gary Soto she is rejecting the past at some point in her poem, though she does not totally cut off all the links. The theme of the old folk also offers the temptation of the nostalgic vision. The poem oscillates between the acknowledgment of reality and the wish to escape into illusions. The rich ethnic flavor is brought in by the detailed characterization of the narrator's grandparents and parents, their philosophy of life as demonstrated by example and as verbalized by themselves.

The final three stanzas include both rejection and consent. The lyrical I expresses sympathy for their way of life directed by the promises of ideologies and of the imagination, for their enjoyment of the epiphany of passionate moments. These lessons are then applied to the narrator's own craft, her poetry serving as her fire escape and as a source of emotional satisfaction. The final lines of the poem describe her distrust in such fragile constructions, in her own ability to follow in the footsteps of the old folk with her own rationality and the collected evidence that they were merely subsisting on illusions and lies. This results in a final instability characterized by the narrator's fear of the future. In contrast to Gary Soto García succeeds in dealing with a universal theme, her protagonist's vacillation between rationality and belief, other-directedness, self-centeredness and tradition-oriented life, the nostalgic view and a straight assessment of bare facts, without cutting down on the ethnic experience, though at the same time refusing blind acceptance but not as radically as in Gary Soto's poem "Braly Street". As a poet in the poem she can obviously relate very directly to highly emotional scenes and integrate them into her picture of herself, thus rescuing a past with a difference.

So, the balancing act can still be achieved though a poem like "pura mentira" in some of us evokes nostalgic memories of the straight, anti-assimilationist poetry of the early seventies when we did not have to take refuge to 'byeways' and 'sidetracks' like literature by "women of color", to "bridges called my back" or "borderlands/la frontera"²⁰ to define the difference and to keep it highly visible.

Notes

- 1- (Denver, 1967) and (New York, 1972).
- 2- E.M., "Gonzales, Rodolfo (Corky)" (1928-), in Julio A. Martinez and Francisco A. Lomelf, eds. *Chicano Literature. A reference Guide*, (Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1985), 223-224; Cf. also Armando B. Rendon. *Chicano Manifesto* (New York, 1971), 276-325.
- 3- I am using Hamlin Garland's definition of "local color in a novel" in *Crumbling Idols. Twelve Essays on Art and Literature*, (Gainesville, Fl. : 1952), 64; first published in 1894.
- 4- "Nostalgia" in *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (College Edition) (1968). Cf. also Luis Dávila, "Otherness in Chicano Literature", in J.W. Wilkie, M.C. Meyer, and E. Monzon de Wilkie, eds. *Contemporary Mexico. Papers of the IV. Internatioanal Congress of Mexican History*, (Berkeley and Mexico City, 1976), 556-563: "Only when this [liberation] is accomplished will the Chicano rescue that lonely and melancholy voice that his bicultural self knows so well". (563)
- 5- Cf. *Chicano Poetry. A Critical Introduction*, (Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1986).
- 6- In A.C. Shular, T. Ybarra-Frausto, J. Sommers, eds. *Literatura Chicana. Texto y Contexto*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : 1972), 182-186.
- 7- In *Floricante en Aztlán*, (1971).
- 8- In *Hay otra voz Poems*, (1972).
- 9- In *The Elements of San Joaquín*, (1977).
- 10- Cf. "Dreiser and the Triumph of Art", *Commentary* 11:5 (May 1951), 502-503.
- 11- Juan Bruce-Novoa, "Chicano Poetry", in J. Martínez and F.A. Lomelf, eds. *Chicano Literature. A Reference Guide*, *op. cit.*, 168.
- 12- Cf. *Die zeitgenössische Literatur der Chicanos (1959-1988)* (Frankfurt, 1990) 228.
- 13- Cf. "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes", in Sandra Cisneros. *The House on Mango Street* (Houston, 1985), 101-102 and the answers to "How do you perceive your role as a writer vis-a-vis: (a) the Chicano community or Movement ; (b) U.S. society; literature itself?" in Juan Bruce-Novoa. *Chicano Authors. Inquiry by Interview* (Austin, Tx. : University of Texas Press, 1980).
- 14- Cf. Juan Bruce-Novoa's analysis of the poem in *Chicano Poetry. A Response to Chaos* (Austin, Tx.:University of Texas Press : 1982), 34-47. In her *Chicano Poetry. A Critical Introduction*, *op. cit.* Cordelia Candelaria mentions that the "use of the journey motif is heightened by

the linkage to drugs and to his life as a pinto". (110). Dieter Herms in his *Die zeitgenössische Literatur der Chicanos (1959-1988)* (Frankfurt, 1990) discusses the poem in a subchapter "Pinto Poetry and Raúl Salinas" (224-230).

15- Cf. Gary Soto's title formula *Living Up the Street. Narrative Recollections* (San Francisco, Ca. : 1985). "en el barrio" shares some details with another Alurista poem "las canicas y mis callos" also published in *Floriscanto en Aztlán*. Cf. Francisco A. Lomelí and Donaldo Urioste, "El concepto del barrio en tres poetas chicanos: Abelardo, Alurista y Ricardo Sanchez". *De Colores* 3:4 (1977), 22-29.

16- This very well compares with Salinas' statement on the genesis of his poem: "I couldn't stop, I couldn't eat. I couldn't do anything but write. So I knew it was something". (Wolfgang Binder.) *Partial Autobiographies. Interviews With Twenty Chicano Poets*, (Palm & Enke Erlanger, 1985), 153; also with the ideology behind a romantic poem like William Wordsworth, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge", 1802.

17- Wolfgang Binder, *Partial Autobiographies. Interviews With Twenty Chicano Poets*, *op. cit.* 220.

18- For the autobiographical background of this poem consult Wolfgang Binder. *Partial Autobiographies. Interviews With Twenty Chicano Poets*, *op. cit.*, 190-200 and also Gary Soto's *Living Up the Street. Narrative Recollections*, *op. cit.*, *Small Faces*, (Houston, Tx. : Arte Público, 1986), *Lesser Evils. Ten Quartets*, (Houston, Tx. : Arte Público, 1988), and *Baseball in April and Other Stories*, (San Diego, Ca. : 1990).

19- To be published in an anthology of recent Chicano poetry with German translations (Bamberg, 1993).

20- I am paraphrasing book titles like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*, (Boston, Mass. : Persephone, 1981), Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco, Ca. : Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987) and Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. *Making Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras. Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of color*, (San Francisco, Ca. : Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1990).