Arias, Ronald Francis (1941- )

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**Secondary Sources**


**ARIA,* RONALD FRANCIS**


(C.C.)

**ARIA,* RONALD FRANCIS* (1941– ). Ronald Arias was born on November 30, 1941, in Los Angeles, California. His maternal grandparents were born in Chihuahua and Durango. Arias describes "family stories of my great-grandmother fighting Apaches from the rooftop of her Chihuahua ranch. Valor, heroism, frontier grit." His grandmother lived in El Paso, and Arias spent a good deal of time with her as a boy, attending school there as well as in Los Angeles. Arias' stepfather was a career Army officer, and Arias attended junior high and high schools in Louisiana, Kansas, Colorado, and other states and countries, graduating in 1959 from Stuttgart American High School in Stuttgart, Germany.

In 1962 Arias was awarded an Inter-American Press Association Scholarship to Buenos Aires, Argentina. While there, he wrote for the *Buenos Aires Herald* and sent numerous exclusives to New York (including the *New York Times*) and Los Angeles, particularly regarding the outbreak of the Argentine neo-Nazi movement. He also took a course in Old English literature with Jorge Luis Borges at the National University.

Arias spent 1962–1963 with the Peace Corps at a small village near Cuzco, Peru, operating a community development program that concentrated on nutrition. These were the years of the Peruvian workers' uprisings inspired by Hugo Blanco, and Arias was a distant eyewitness to one massacre of peasants by government machine guns. He traveled extensively at this time throughout Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile, and throughout the 1960s he wrote for the Copley Newspapers and for various national and international wire services.

In 1967 Arias received a B.A. in Spanish from the University of California at Los Angeles, and the following year an M.A. in journalism from the same university. He spent most of 1969 working on the *Caracas Daily Journal* in Caracas, Venezuela. From 1969 to 1971 he worked as editor for various agency publications with the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C. In 1971 he began teaching in California, first at San Bernardino College, and then at Crafton Hills College in Yucaipa, where he still works with the Department of English.

Like Steven Crane and Ernest Hemingway before him, Ron Arias served a long writer's apprenticeship as a newspaperman. Journalism continues to be an active part of his professional life; he has been prominent among contributors to the new *Nuestro*, a commercial publication directed at the burgeoning U.S. Hispanic readership. Between August 1977 and August 1978, Arias published nine pieces in *Nuestro*, including two cover stories on subjects from "The Doctor Who Might Have Been Bumped by Bakke" to "The Man Who Invented the Margarita." His feature pieces on the education of Chicanos in Anglo schools ("We're Supposed to Believe We're Inferior") and on barrio identity ("The
Barrio") were reprinted in James Santibáñez and Ed Ludwig’s anthology, The Chicanos. He has done an opinion feature for the Los Angeles Times (May 4, 1979) entitled “The Distortion of Cinco de Mayo,” which surveys his personal memories and impressions of Cinco de Mayo celebrations in Los Angeles and what they mean to Chicanos, beneath all the U.S. commercialism: “It’s my guess that something strangely untamed is at the bottom of it all, . . . a lingering, desperate hope that perhaps humble common people will deal the last blow against the intruder, hopefully providing a longer-lived victory than that at Puebla.”

But it is his fiction (completely in English) that has propelled Arias into the landscape of Chicano writers, primarily his The Road to Tamaizunchale (1975). His short stories (one of which constitutes a complete chapter of the novel), while often graceful, poignant, and precise, are still better read as preparations for Tamaizunchale.

The settings and characters of Arias’ fiction are almost without exception Chicano, almost always within the barrio, although a specific geographical location may not always be evident. In characterization, Arias displays a fondness for elderly figures (often possessed of some semi-mystical perception or understanding) and children. Several pieces, including central parts of The Road to Tamaizunchale, explore relationships between younger and older characters, relationships that often flower with rich, unexpected, magical revelations, or provide fictional space for tragic commentary on disaster befalling one of the parties. A character who particularly intrigues Arias is the magician, the mago, a shape-shifter who may be of any age and either sex, often appearing as an old man. This figure may also surface as one element in the personality of several characters in a single story, or be concentrated entirely in the central figure. One of the repeated and most delightful subplots of Arias’ fiction is his probing of the limits and ranges of this figure’s power, without ever resolving the issue. By mixing the traditional cues of fictional characterization (for example, having characters reappear after they are dead, blending and confusing internal monologue and narrator’s external observation, presenting a character as perfectly phantasмагorical in one place and completely obvious and “real” in another), he develops an ambiance of inconsistency about some characters—without denying their thematic unities—which gives them a magical, shape-shifting dimension.

On the one hand, this is the ancient “trickster” figure of myth, legend, and song; but in another, modern perspective, he/she is a figure of the narrator, of the author’s fictional self. Arias has indicated specifically that this sense of the narrator is a primary factor in his fascination with the mago. In the most explicit discussion of aesthetic principles he has published, “‘El señor del chivo,’” Arias describes a roadside taco vendor he saw in Michoacán as the model for entertainment and stimulation he believes the writer ought to provide. Describing how El señor del chivo heckled, teased, and challenged his customers, Arias notes his “style of expressing language and experience, this exchange of assaults and retreats, glimpses of truth and untruth, this game playing with reality.” And especially in characterization the “jiving, cabuleando” style of the taco vendor offers some alternative, Arias believes: “I’m annoyed when someone says they can explain or understand another person completely, as if they were writing Time or Newsweek epithets: ‘Juan Valera, the balding, 40-year-old misogynist from Tijuana.’ Poor guy. He’s now relegated to the ‘known’ world of facts. No mystery, no complexity, no questions. We can drop him and go on to the next item” (p. 70).

All of Arias’ distinctive fictional techniques and methods of development emerge from this same concern to avoid what he tells Juan Bruce-Novoa “the literal, fact-finding approach to characters, plot and theme,” and to find instead a “fiction that colors factual reality, that exposes some of the mystery, settings and possibilities of the human mind” (p. 73). To the traditional realists, he owes his concern for precise description, and from the more contemporary writers he inherits techniques such as stream-of-consciousness (essential in Tamaizunchale), self-referentialness, and a sometimes surrealistic cinematic method. His prose style is relaxed, conversational, and often lean but richly suggestive.

The fictional themes of Arias are few—almost obsessively few—but grand and directly reflect this concern to expose “the mystery, settings, and possibilities of the human mind;” death; the role of generations; the preservation of human dignity in situations of personal and social deprivation. The search for a Chicano self-identity and protest against the domination suffered by the majority of Chicanos are themes implicit throughout Arias’ fiction, but they seldom come to the fore. Although the settings and characters of his work are almost without exception Chicano (non-Chicanos are never leading characters and Anglos scarcely exist), these stories are decidedly not provincial or self-obsessed. Arias, through humor, irony, startling juxtapositions of events, and a reduced narrator’s stance, seeks to extract a maximum of fundamentally human value from the Chicano “regionalist,” “colorist,” or “localist” artifacts.

All of the above themes and techniques can be seen emerging in the stories published between 1970 and 1975, when Tamaizunchale also appears. Arias’ first story, “The Mago” (1970), already sets the theme of illusion versus reality that Tamaizunchale will explore so intensely. A little Chicana girl, Luisa, from Glendale and her friend Sally (the “huera” or Anglo) make friends with the old cuarandero, Don Noriega, on the hill (a Doña Noriega later appears in Tamaizunchale). Sally is afraid of him and his shabby house filled with Moroccan rugs, Pre-Columbian figurines, fish tanks, and caged birds. On a visit with Sally’s grandmother, the girls find the mummy of a boy among the artifacts; Sally flees in terror, but Luisa’s curiosity is aroused. The mummy was a reminder, Don Noriega explains, “for the dead must leave something behind to remind the living of those once known and loved.” Months later Luisa summons up enough courage to return to the house alone and finds it in ruins. Entering, she discovers Don Noriega seated on his broken bed. She sits with him and hears a soft, joyous music that mysteriously comes from a small box. The old man gives her that box, but in the sunlight she finds that it is only a black piece of wood with two
dangling strings. The house had been burned, and there was no Don Noriega. The themes of death’s illusions, extrarational wisdom, childish and/or childlike imagination are all here in this delicate story. The relationship of the old man and the young person, developed extensively with Fausto and Mario in Tamazunchale, is also here. Interestingly, it is the darker (more Indian?) of the two girls who is most open to the magic of her experience.

"The Interview" (1974) is of less interest in itself than in the fact that it recently (1979) found its true form as Arias' first dramatic script. A young Chicano named Tony, hired by a consultant group, is attempting to administer a social profile questionnaire on Chicanos. He encounters two "winos," one of whom tells the story (stories) of his life in exchange for money. It is an intricate tale of naval service, marital bliss and conflict, and many children—with the final qualifier that all, or any part of it, may or may not be true. Tony throws away his questionnaire and asks for the wine. The dramatic version of "The Interview," with flashbacks and scenes, is more sophisticated and effective work than the story.

"The Wetback," which won the UC Irvine Chicano Literary Contest Award in fiction in 1975, forms Chapter 7 of Tamazunchale. The leading character of this brief tale is dead. He is a young man, found by children in the dry riverbed, his clothes soaking wet. Everyone agrees he is a victim of drowning; "that the river was dry occurred only to the children." The community takes in the body as one of its own, and Mrs. Rentería, who had never married, makes him her personal claim, naming him David. She cleans and shaves him, dresses him in fresh clothes, and everyone comes by to shake his hand and gossip. For several days he "survives" with Mrs. Rentería, "taking her out arm in arm, to stroll the lush gardens of his home, somewhere far away to the south. He fed her candies, gave her flowers and eventually spoke of eternity and a breeze that never dies." On the third day the decaying dead man is inexplicably restored "to his former self" by old Fausto, "using a knowledge more ancient than the first Inca, than the first Tarahumara," and is then carried back to the riverbed to be found by others. "The Wetback" is the most masterful and accomplished of Arias' early stories. In this story for the first time in Arias' fiction there emerges a complexity of imagination involving Chicano culture with its individual needs and public images, all seen through the profoundly distorting/clarifying lens of death-consciousness. A particularly Chicano pose, closely linked to a Mexican sense of death-consciousness, is struck in "Wetback," and will grow into numerous scenes of Tamazunchale. (As will be detailed later in this article this story creates structural problems of integration in the novel, however.)

"A House on the Island" (1975) is a bold and imaginative experiment in narrative technique—not entirely successful—and is one of the few Arias stories that have nothing to do with the barrio ambiance and characters of Tamazunchale. The story is an allegory—literally, it would seem—of two creative writing students, Ricardo and Nan, who pursue their poetry teacher, Elena Alvarez, through the jungle of an island where they all go, supposedly to visit the house of the teacher's father. But there is no house, and the teacher seduces Ricardo as Nan watches horrified from the bushes. In this story Arias explores the devices of flashback, juxtaposed dialogue, and blending of scenes.

"The Story Machine" (1975) returns to the barrio theme, this time with an accomplished narrative technique that for the first time mirrors itself as a device of reality and illusion. As in "Mago," children meet a magical, wise old man, this time sitting by the river with a green dog and a tape recorder that speaks by itself and tells stories in the voices of each child. And the stories come true—immonently enough they deal with pretending to be a frog, wearing socks inside out, and going to the zoo. But when the machine says one day that the older sister of one of the children would die in a car accident, the adults get involved. In a boy they hunt out the old man, chase him away, and smash his machine. The girl does not get killed, and the old man never returns. What threatened to become a decay of reality is purged, and adult rationality is restored. The title suggests a fable about the art of writing, and the lines of such an interpretation are immediately obvious: fictive imagination, the gift to see the marvelous interpenetration of past, present, and future in narrative art, is a feature of all children and a few wise men. Opposed to this is all the rational righteousness of adult "maturity." But even the adults take this fiction seriously and lock the girl in her room until danger is past. The aura of mystery lingers on in the implied question left teasing the reader's imagination: Would the girl have been killed if the adults had not found the old man and destroyed his machine?

"The Castle" (1976), Arias' first story after Tamazunchale, again centers on the relationship between a child and a solitary old man, this time in a compensatory role for the boy's absent (perhaps dead) soldier father. But this time both boy and old man are victims of violence, both distant (the Vietnam War has taken the boy's father and has made his mother a jangle of nerves; the old man is a tramp, a social outcast) and local (older boys attack and beat the old man, and accidentally put out the boy's eye with a flying stone). The profic imagination of the old man, which peoples their common refuge in a ruined, labyrinthise Hollywood country club with knights, apprentices, dragons, and "marauders," is impotent before the onslaught of real marauders. There is no saving magic. Echoing, symbolic levels of violence are precisely and efficiently summoned together in this "small" urban tragedy that marks a life forever and starkly sets forth the vulnerability of innocence.

"Chiques" (1977) is a turn away from the barrio scenes common to the earlier stories. This brief piece fits strictly into the traditional realist mode; a single flashback conversation, an ordinary reverie, provides the only break in an otherwise directly chronological ordering of events. The central character, Gabriela—presumably Chicana—is "vacationing" alone in an unnamed, inaccessible Mexican village to visit "the ruins," in flight from some ambiguous domestic crisis: "No, not now, Roberto, I don't want your hands and your patience and your bed...maybe later but not now. I don't know what it is, but
not now” (p. 182). Gabriela is trapped in the village by three days of rain which has halted the buses. Everything about the place oppresses her: the lonely ticket-seller, the churro vendor, the bare plaza, the peeling houses, but particularly the grimy hotel-keeper who continually offers his own bed. The bedbugs summarize all those vaguely defined, apparently implacable forces seeking to suck out her vital energies. “They’re everywhere,” the hotel-keeper explains when she threatens to move to another hotel, and furthermore, he adds, “Chinches never die.” Finally, succumbing to the unrelenting grey rain and confronted with her own incapacity to write down in even the simplest words her authentic experience, she lies down naked in the growing darkness and surrenders herself to their bites. “Chinches” is simultaneously a story about the search for Chicano cultural “roots,” their often disillusioning surface realities, and about the struggle of women, Chicana or otherwise (there is nothing in this story which insists Gabriela be seen only in her ethnic context), to escape the frequently vague pressures that steadily bear on them.

The Road to Tamazunchale (1975) has received nearly universal acclaim by both the Chicano and non-Chicano critics: “A small, unpretentious jewel” (José Antonio Villareal*); “a landmark in Chicano fiction” (Nicolás Kanellos); “in this novel, Chicano literature gains a most creative dimension” (Tomás Rivera*); “an absolutely unique book” (Peter Beagle) (publicity blurb). It is a brief (108 pages in the first West Coast Poetry Review edition) novel divided into thirteen chapters (the number of heavenly levels, incidentally, in the upper world according to Nahua-Azteca cosmology) which chronicle the last few days in the life of Fausto Tejada, a broken-down, retired encyclopedia salesman of the east Los Angeles barrio. In the elaboration of his fantastic, self-invented ritual of preparation for death, however, Fausto reveals a spirit, grounded in the power of a vital, liberating imagination, which is far from broken down. The figure of old Fausto before “the great death”—his own, personal extinction—is uniquely authentic and inspiring not only for Chicano fiction, but also in contemporary American writing. In this novel, Chicano reality has uncompromisingly asserted its particular Spanish-Indian-Yankee Weltanschauung, its ground of being and identity, which can become evident and comprehensible to non-Chicanos only through the modes and images of the imagination, the business of literature.

Vernon Lattin’s perceptive summary of the novel is worth quoting at length:

Combining the Germanic Faust and the Spanish Don Quijote, Arias creates a Chicano who can transcend the boundaries between illusion and reality, between imagination and fact, between life and death. Through a series of simulated death scenes, fantasies, and dreams the logic of time and space is dissolved, and, unlike his legendary European namesakes, Fausto Tejada escapes disillusionment, death, and damnation. Whereas at the beginning of the novel the dying Fausto is peeling the rotting skin off his body and seeking pity, by the end of the novel, having seen the deficiencies of Christianity in a series of comic episodes, and having teamed up with a mephistophelian Pachucu (Mario) and a Peruvian shepherd (Marcelino Huana), he forgets his own dying and looks outward to help others. He has learned from the Peruvian shepherd of his Indian past, and he has developed a sense of pastoral wholeness and the continuity of past with present. After Fausto’s death the novel continues for one more chapter without suggestions of distortion or logical violation. Fausto and his friends continue as in the past: there is no funeral or burial; the logic of the world and the dichotomy of life and death have been transcended, and the road to Tamazunchale has become a sacred way for Everyman to follow (p. 631).

Tamazunchale is the account of the last four days (or six—there’s a chronological confusion, perhaps deliberate, in the “Wetback” chapter) of Fausto’s life. We find him six years after his retirement, in the care of niece Carmela, tired, bored, surviving. In the opening scene he peels off his entire skin like an Aztec priest in the ritual of Xipe Totec, folds it up, and holds it out to Carmela: “It fell to the floor. ‘You want some more Kleenex?’ she asked and pushed the box closer” (p. 13). Skin or kleeex? Do we believe Fausto or Carmela? In this way imagination and reality mingle with one another without warning, often from sentence to sentence, throughout the novel, until it becomes impossible to segregate anymore the fantasy from the “reality”—which is certainly Arias’ artistic purpose.

It is, in fact, difficult to identify just where in the narrative Fausto actually dies, though that event/even is the focus of his entire activity. Clearly, in the final chapter he has entered some other mode of existence—people turn into chrysanthemums, foxes, a string of beads, bears, a rustic wind, and cars romp like-horses—though he is still in a very real Los Angeles among his neighbors who take him to a bookstore, the Cuatro Milpas restaurant, and finally on a picnic at the Elysian Park (which is the scene of numerous Faustian adventures in the narrative). Presumably he dies at the end of Chapter 12: “Cuca, seated by the bed was silent. She wiped the dribble from Fausto’s mouth, and for a long time listened to the brittle wheeze coming from his withered throat, stared at the sallow sagging face, at the thin, crooked fingers, and waited for one more clap” (p. 100). But is it not until the end of the novel that Fausto “...set himself down beside his wife [who died years before the story begins], clapped some life into his cold hands, then crossed them over his chest and went to sleep” (p. 107). Some “life into his cold hands”? Is he dead or not? Or what is his death anyway?

The entire novel is rooted in meditation on death and spins its narrative thread from Fausto’s moment of terrified rebellion (echoing the great defiance of his Germanic namesake) to the transcendent reconciliation of Chapter 13. “Suddenly the monstrous dread of dying seized his mind, his brain ached, and he trembled like a naked child in the snow. No, he shouted, it can’t happen, it won’t happen!” (p. 14). Of course it does, somehow, to us all, and Fausto’s struggle to find his peace with this death propels him into a genuine symbol of the literary imagination, something in which, as Coleridge said, “the universal shines through the particular.” Fausto does not transcend his Chicano culture and identity, but, in the alchemy of Arias’ imagination, he comes to represent aspects of a universal human dilemma identifiable to both Chicano and non-Chicano alike.
While the actuality of Fausto's physical decline and impending death provides the bass continuo of the narrative and is never called into question, elements of another, fantastic reality continually and insistently intrude themselves. In Chapter 2 Fausto rides a bus into sixteenth-century Lima, then comes into the city at the head of a cavalry regiment, and takes a taxi to his hotel where the vicerey sends him a prostitute who looks like his niece. She takes him off to the jungle in a train, then up the mountain where, in the moonlight, he becomes the unwilling center of some Indian ceremony of mourning. In Chapter 3, he helps an Inca shepherd get his "alpacas" off the Los Angeles freeway, and he escapes unwilling center of some Indian ceremony of mourning. In Chapter 3, he helps the head of a cavalry regiment, and takes a CtFausto rides a bus into sixteenth-century Lima, then comes into the city at another, fantastic reality continually and insistently intrude themselves. In Chap­

The most consistent sign of this other reality is the character Marcelino Huanca, the Peruvian alpaca-herder. He is first intiminated into the narrative at the close of Chapter 1 as "the song of life... the faint, soft sound of a flute," which Fausto hears in response to his defiance of death. He does not appear physically to Fausto until the fiasco on the freeway in Chapter 3, and not until Chapter 6 does someone other than Fausto actually see him (Carmela finds him, poncho, flap-eared cap, and all, sitting in the bathtub and comes out of the bathroom screaming), and from then on he becomes just another barrio personality. Meanwhile, in Chapter 4 he tells Fausto his story: "The gist of [it] was clear: he had wandered from the usual pastures, drifted over the mountain pass and... had descended into a valley of blinding lights" (p. 35). The climax of the Fausto-Marcelino relationship is the Hollywood episode in Chapter 6 when they wander together through what is apparently a movie set, certainly one of the finest echoes of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in contemporary fiction. Later, Marcelino reveals to Fausto the secret cure for his illness: build a small pile of stones as high as possible; "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 the last stone. Nothing can make you fall" (p. 50).

Other fantastic elements in Chapters 7–12 include a dead man who does not decay and is "restored" by Indian magic, a grand smuggling scheme in which Fausto leads hundreds of men across the border at Tijuana disguised as drunken sailors, several conversations with Fausto's dead wife, and community drama at the climax of which everyone, actors and audience, marches up a ramp and out into the stars. All of these elements climax with a festival of realities in Chapter 13, when Fausto's neighbors accompany him on a transcendental picnic where one becomes a fox, another a bear, another a television set, and Fausto goes up to sit with his wife on a cloud: "His book, cape, staff, cologne and slippers followed him up." 

The vortex of the novel's multiple symbols is the drama which the barrio residents improvise in Chapter 11 for entertainment of their Mexican visitors, also called "The Road to Tamazunchale." Tamazunchale itself, as Arias dem-

Student: Why does the protagonist, Fausto, experience a transformation from his real-world existence to a parallel reality? How does this parallel reality reflect the themes of the novel, and what does it reveal about the protagonist's inner state?

Assistant: The protagonist, Fausto, experiences a transformation from his real-world existence to a parallel reality to reflect the themes of the novel, such as the dual nature of reality and the power of imagination. The parallel reality, characterized by the presence of Marcelino Huanca and other fantastic elements, mirrors Fausto's inner state of confusion and loss. It reveals his deeply felt sorrow and his search for a spiritual solution to his physical decay. The parallel reality serves as a metaphor for Fausto's psychological journey, where he encounters a world that is both familiar and foreign, mirroring his own identity crisis and the struggle to find meaning in the face of impending death.
perceived boundaries between realism and imagination. On the other hand, as "The Wetback" is such a successfully whole artifact in itself, it may be that the writer simply forgot to incorporate the story within the framework of the novel, overlooking this detail of his chronological structure.

As indicated above, reviews of The Road to Tamazunchale have been almost universally favorable. A number of essay-length analyses and review articles were published on the novel in the first year after its appearance, five of them in 1977. Almost all have suggested Arias' affinity for the modes of the new Latin American fiction. In the "Special Issue" of Latin American Literary Review devoted to Chicano Literature (Spring-Summer 1977), Eliud Martinez tries to identify the novel's contemporaneity, locating it in the tradition of "the new realism" (which he believes subsumes the "realismo magico" of Latin American fiction) as defined by the work of such artists as Luigi Pirandello, Jean Genet, Luis Buñuel, Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Juan Rulfo, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes. Martinez attempts to link Tamazunchale to this line through its use of what he calls "the new breed of character," characters who are "illusory, contradictory, and ambiguous," or "fictions in the minds of other characters," and "aware of [their] existence as a character." He finds numerous such figures in Tamazunchale, as well as frequent echoes of Buñuel and Bergman. He discusses the "overlapping of illusion and reality," and he offers an analysis of the metaphoric quality adhering in the name "Tamazunchale," calling it "metaphor for the other world" and "a metaphor for the world beyond." Arias, Martinez believes, "deals with universal themes that bring the novel into focus," and "has captured the special flavor, the rhythm and idioms of Chicano popular and conversational speech" (p. 59). As he concludes "...no Chicano novel before Tamazunchale has tapped the artistic resources of the modern and contemporary novel (and the arts) in a comparable way, deliberately and intuitively" (p. 60).

Carlota Cárdenas de Dwyer, primarily through a close analysis of the novel's first two chapters, identifies Arias' style with Borges' cosmopolitan style. While asserting that Arias has "vividly captured the authentic detail of Chicano life," Cárdenas says this is not, however, the novel's primary attraction. Avoiding the terms "reality" and "illusion," she refers to two "levels of interest": the level of the aging, physical Fausto and the level of "excursions into the inner world." Arias, she claims, "as a modern Chicano writer, is wedged between the parallel traditions of modern U.S. writers and the so-called magic-realists of contemporary Latin American fiction."

Willard Gingerich, the reviewer for Southwest Review (Summer 1977), who calls Tamazunchale a "masterful narrative," also points out Arias' "apprenticeship" to the fiction of the Latin American "Boom," suggesting that he has succeeded where other American writers have failed in transferring the techniques of the Latin American masters to English. "This is not a free-floating 'fabulist' narrative of the avant-garde sort practiced about New York. . . . 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 misappprehended techniques of new masters" (p. vi).

Marvin Lewis looks at Tamazunchale as a prime example of the recent evolution of Chicano fiction "beyond social realism in treating the urban scene to enter into the realm of fantasy and magical realism." He explores the themes of mythos and the search for Paradise in the novel, and he interprets the final vision as "a friendly coalescence of Man, other Animals, and Nature . . . in direct juxtaposition to the stark freeways, cars, smog . . . of L.A. civilization" (p. 51). Lewis, incidentally, points out Marcellino's perfectly archetypal role by quoting definitions of the shepherd (universal psychopomp who herds cosmic forces) and the flute from Cirlot's Dictionary of Symbols.

Tamazunchale's break with the tradition of social realism in earlier Chicano fiction provides the basis for the only critical assault on the novel so far. In De Colores (1977) Mariana Marín calls Tamazunchale a "superficial" parody of Don Quixote and laments Arias' "feeble and futile attempt to juxtapose the realms of fantasy and reality, . . . limited to mediocre imitations of characters [from Quixote]" (p. 35). Marín's objections are clearly extraliterary, however—rooted in the author's supposed moral failure to take a clearly defensive and utilitarian position on Chicano experience.

If Tamazunchale can be faulted in any major way, it is perhaps in Arias' hesitation to trust the fictive imagination to its fullest. He vacillates between a rationalist reduction of all things fantastic to a function of Fausto's feverish brain chemistry, 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 it does not seem that Arias is working for the 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 in conscious, linear, everyday experience. But, on the other hand, the quality itself of that narrative event reveals Arias' awareness of an ineffable otherness within Fausto's dream, providing a surpassing escape from self, psychologizing, and even death, an escape that is the figure of Arias' 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 the one character calls the mythic Mexican town, and the true Tamazunchale of the liberated fictive imagination.

The numerous reviewers who see Latin American techniques in Arias' fiction are undoubtedly correct. His broad travel and living experience throughout Latin America exposed him to the work of numerous authors, among whom he has indicated "a not too studied preference" for Quiroga (the jungle stories), Roberto Juárez (Argentina), Ciro Alegria (Peru), Ricardo Palma (Peru), José Eustacio Rivera (Colombia), José Donoso (Chile), Mario Benedetti (Uruguay), Machado d'Assis (Brazil), "and of course Cien años de soledad." "In the end, though,"
he adds, "what most excites me are the early chronicles." In the same interview (with Juan Bruce-Novoa), when asked about the relationship of Chicano writing to Mexican literature, he points out the master who portrays a Mexican rural ambiance, Juan Rulfo, and the classical Nahuat poets. A specific instance of how Borges' penchant for listing the excessively detailed trivia of reality (also a feature of the old chronicles) influenced Arias is found in Chapter 13 of Tamazunchale when Fausto goes out to buy a pile of books for wherever it is he is going:

Diaries, journals, crates of paperbacks, encyclopedias in five languages, a Nahuat 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, an early cosmography of the known and unknown world, a treatise on the future of civilization in the Sea of Cortez, two coffee-table editions on native American foods, an anthology of uninvited myths and three boxes of unwritten books (p. 119).

The sometimes surrealistic, ironic humor of García Márquez is evident in Fausto's confrontation with the funeral procession and the incident of the playful snow-cloud. But it is the Mexican death-consciousness of Fuentes' La muerte de Artemio Cruz and especially of Rulfo's Pedro Páramo, where the living and the dead coexist, that most informs the desires, memories, fantasies, and fears of old Fausto Tejada's last four days on this side of Tamazunchale. The novel begins with an epigram of ancient Mexican lament from the Nahuatl icnocuicatl, "songs of anguish."

Although his fiction is written completely in English (he is more fluent in English, Arias says, but not always comfortable), he has never spoken in print of his fictional preferences in that language. His style is such an amalgam that without specific indication on his part or a larger body of work to analyze, speculation on English influences—beyond the obvious Hemingwayan model for sharp visual images and efficient diction—is a guessing game. Suffice it to say that the posturing presence of the hypermacho narrator à la Norman Mailer is conspicuously absent. Beyond all these "influences," of course, only Arias himself is responsible for the blending and altering that produce his own fictional voice.

According to the criteria which John Barth describes in his program for the postmodern novel ("The Literature of Replenishment," Atlantic, January 1980), The Road to Tamazunchale may well prove a minor masterpiece not only of "ethnic" writing, but also of the new American fiction at large. Barth suggests that this "worthy" program "is the synthesis or transcension" of the thesis premodernism (nineteenth-century realism) and the antithesis modernism of the twentieth century to produce a new mode that will "somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and idealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction." Arias, it would seem, has set an example. There is in Tamazunchale a serious critique of the "objective," capitalist social order which has consumed the life and energies of Fausto the

encyclopedia salesman and left him to die with only his own magnificent resources of imagination. It is an implied critique, however; no character or specific event ever gives it direct articulation. Clearly, Fausto is oppressed, but he is never repressed or defeated. In short, the synthesis or modes which Arias achieves in Tamazunchale are emphatically a contemporary syncretistic accomplishment. According to Arias' own testimony, the sophistication and perception that make this vision possible comes, not in spite of, but directly as consequence of, his "marginal" Chicano identity. In "El señor del chivo," he asserts, "Certainly ethnic or third-world writers are able to see America as it has not been seen by most of the country's mainstream writers" (none of whom, Barth says, has yet accomplished the true postmodern synthesis). "We writers with a blend of cultural perspectives recognize that we have an inside track on creating (the) different or 'colored' reality I mentioned" (p. 59).

In a review of Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima, Arias refers to an entire out-pouring of recent literary works whose only common denominator is their Chicano authorship, thus making them authentically American. In this liberated outpouring of Chicano consciousness, Arias himself certainly promises to become a major figure, absorbing and subsuming voices from Nezahualcóyotl to Bernal Díaz, to Hemingway, to García Márquez into "home-grown American stuff" as only the quicksilver of primary literary imagination can.

Arias has tried his hand at scriptwriting and has prepared two full-length film scripts and three television series texts. More recently, he signed a contract with a New York publisher for a large book on the Hispanic-American perceptions of American society, values, and culture. "I'm tempted," he says of this work-in-progress, "to try for a 'new' form—that is, not Question & Answer, nor the typical profile with quotes of most news and feature stories in newspapers, magazines and books. I'd rather risk doing something that may come closer to the essence...of people...I really don't have a model" (p. 70).

Selected Bibliography

Works


BARRIO, RAYMOND (1921– ). Born in West Orange, New Jersey, on August 27, 1921, of Latin American parents, Barrio served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He pursued his education in California, where he has lived most of his life since his graduation from high school. He attended the University of Southern California and Yale University, but received his B.A. degree in humanities from the University of California at Berkeley in 1947. He also completed a B.M.A. degree at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles in 1952.

Barrio explains that his vocation is art and his avocation is writing, something he does principally for himself, "an audience of one." He made his livelihood exhibiting and selling paintings until 1957, when his marriage to Mexican-born Yolanda Sánchez Ocio necessitated a more secure means of supporting his family. Since art was to subsidize writing, in 1961 he began to teach part time at various institutions of higher education. Before his retirement from teaching in 1977, he taught such diverse courses as "Ancient Civilizations" and "How to Write a Book"; he worked at the University of California at Santa Barbara, San Jose State University, and Foothill, De Anza, Skyline, Canada and West Valley colleges. His artistic works have been displayed in over eighty national exhibitions. At present he lives in Guerneville, California, with his wife and the youngest three of his five children, Raymond Jr., Andrea, and Margarita.

Author Raymond Barrio is known principally as the creator of The Plum Plum Pickers (1969), one of the first novels of the post-1965 Chicano literary Renaissance. More recently, his Mexico's Art and Chicano Artists (1975) has also gained some recognition. However, these books represent only a small portion of the author's very diversified production. Most of his books combine art (etchings) with original or preferred selections which function as narrative complements. In Selections from Walden, for example, he endorses Thoreau's belief in creative fulfillment as a primary commitment, a principle Barrio himself has lived by in carefully reserving time to write his books. Also in the group of little...