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# Leroy V. Quintana and the New Mexican Perspective

by Douglas K. Benson

The poetry of Leroy V. Quintana opens up for us a world and a vision which until the last decade or so has remained inaccessible to the majority of American readers. Many of Quintana's fellow Chicanos from outside New Mexico consider it remote as well, for the particular kind of mystical fatalism that gives its stamp to that people is essentially unknown and widely misunderstood (Gerdes 249). It is the product of centuries of cultural fusion, only marginally related to the political activism which produced a new flowering of Chicano arts in the Southwest over a decade ago.

The original inhabitants of New Mexico, the Native Americans of the stable, agriculturally based *pueblos* along the Rio Grande and in the many mountain ranges, had over thousands of years developed a working vision of ecological and social equilibrium that placed man squarely at the center of responsibility for the well-being of the universe. In contrast to the European Christian ethic, which teaches that man was placed on the earth to have dominion over it, Native American religion—from Alaska to the tip of Chile, from the sacred *Popol Vuh* of the Mayas to N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winner *House Made of Dawn*—teaches that man's place is equal to that of all other elements, not superior to it. For the Native American, the universe consists of a series of interlocking connections, forces, causes and effects. By studying how natural objects function in a complex system of checks and balances, the Native American has developed a set of rituals and patterns of words and actions which respond to its complexity and which recognize its interrelationships. Only by taking care, by following the way, can humans not upset the natural balance of the ecological and social levels of being (Lincoln and Standiford in Baker 80-196).

Into this world densely populated by spiritual forces came another culture, that of the descendants of Spanish and *mestizo* settlers who arrived from Mexico in 1598. This Hispanic culture, origi-

nally in conflict with that of the Native American, gradually began to learn from it and to create a new lifestyle born of the fusion of cultures. This process occurred in Texas and California as well, but there it began later and was interrupted earlier by the Anglo invasion (McWilliams 24, 53).

Hispanic culture brought to the Southwest a profound, practical sense of the function of the extended family, with its vigorous daily interaction, and of the complexity of the spiritual world as seen through the Spanish Catholic church (Lewald 1-9, 263-265; Mead in Lewald 374-377). Though the Hispanic settlers had only a vague notion of the ecological insights possessed by the Native Americans they found, they did adopt from them some of the technology necessary for agriculture and for survival in New Mexico's icy mountains and searing deserts. It is not difficult to understand how they might come to fuse their reverence for personal relationships as practiced in family structures with the Native American's reverence for the living land (Chang 41-42), and how the deep spirituality of their stoic Catholic vision of patience and personal sacrifice might find a ready counterpart in the Native American's appreciation of his place in a cosmic system of compensations. Thus through constant interchange, the cultural conflict evolved into a fluid, complementary way of dealing with the world. There is, of course, always the matter of the strong Hispanic sense of personal dignity, of pride in one's individuality, that could never fit into the Native American's vision of social equilibrium. Cultural fusion is never absolute; a streak of individual stubbornness defines some of the actions of certain characters in Quintana's poems.

Some of this cultural fusion took the form of a new style of oral narrative. Spaniards had always told tales of their history, of local events, of mysterious happenings and of family members. But in the Southwest this tradition became joined with the intensely poetic oral tradition of the Native American, in which the most important function is that of

creating “rhymes of perception”—the interconnections between mythic universe, physical world and man that are so evident and so powerful in contemporary Native American verse. Dreams, visions, paintings of spirit horses drawn on *tipis*, Kachinas—these are all intuitions of the true world of the spirit which the Native American cultivates in his oral tradition and in his modern literature (Lincoln in Baker 98-105).

Thus an oral narrative tradition that was primarily focused on recreating the bonds between man and his people, his family, also began to take on a new kind of mythic significance in which people become symbols of greater forces which are only partially perceived by man and which correspond to European intellectual activity only in a very indirect way. The Native American does not seek to understand in the European sense; sacred meanings—the interconnections of renewing life forms—cannot be completely perceived by man (Lincoln in Baker 106-115). That mysterious “other” world, however, defines the physical world. The boundaries of time and space exist only in *this* less perfect sphere of consciousness.

The fusion of Hispanic and Native American visions is evident in Latin American literature as well. The rigidly intellectual structures of Jorge Luis Borges belong to the European tradition, but at every moment Borges recreates the experience of the unknown, of the intuited, of the *limits* of logic. The fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez goes even further, drawing on an animist view of the universe which he and other practitioners of so-called “magical realism” could not have learned from European models.

Leroy Quintana fell heir to their rich fusion of traditions as he listened to his grandparents tell tales of *brujas* (witches), of buried treasure, of La Llorona (the legendary ghost-woman who cries out for her lost children in the night wind). He incorporates these elements into his first two books, *Hijo del Pueblo* (1976) and the American Book Award winner *Sangre* (1981). In English, the titles are *Son of the People* and *Blood*, the latter referring to the blood of his family tree. Yet these are not mere nostalgic memories of his ancestors; they reveal profound truths about the relationships between man and his world:

There are many stories in the family  
about grandfather:

It is said that as a youth he was so strong  
it took two men to take him down.

In his time he walked to Wyoming to shear sheep  
so many times he couldn't remember how many

He never had shoes as a young shepherd boy  
because his parents couldn't afford any,

he cut his feet on the rocks  
when he walked the hills  
looking for stray lambs.  
Many years later, in a V. A. hospital  
said he could hear the saw  
cutting through the bone  
when his leg was amputated.  
Never said anything about the other leg  
after it was severed.

When he was a fletero,  
carrying different types of freight  
in his carro de caballos,  
he spent one night, perhaps his longest,  
in a room of a casa despoblada  
frozen with fear, as a group of brujas danced,  
he saw their shadows on the walls  
flickering like the flames  
of the candles in the next room  
back and forth, back and forth, until dawn.

These stories about grandpa have been told  
in the rooms of my family's homes  
across the years, while the brujas  
of our haunted blood dance  
in the next room, dance in the next room.

(*Sangre* 5)

The poem is set in the intimate, personal style of the oral narrative; at the same time, of course, the structures and techniques also borrow from contemporary international poetry, which in turn has borrowed from modern fiction. The first part of this poem depicts the resilience of his grandfather in the face of enormous obstacles: distances, sharp stones, even the loss of his legs (which once could take him to Wyoming) as a result of his military service. He bears all this in stoic silence. This prepares the reader to take seriously the events in the *casa despoblada* (haunted house); it is the product of no child's imagination. But to explain it is something else. The family recounts it, experiences it, feels its power. And so do we, for the poem itself enacts a mystery drawn from this “story” and extrapolated. The last stanza, which begins as a recapitulation (“These stories about grandpa . . .”), suddenly veers off in a new direction: the rooms of his family's homes and even the *blood* of the family tree are haunted by *brujas* (witches). Grandfather (and the speaker) could not explain what he saw in that abandoned house; we cannot explain this presence in the blood. This second mystery is actualized in the poetic structures, not in the oral tradition. In addition, we realize that the “stories” of the spiritual world have their definite place in the narrative tradition; they may frighten, but we “know” them. The mysteries of the blood are not even a part of that tradition.

This effect is made more powerful by two sty-

listic devices. One, increasingly a device in Chicano poetry, is a bilingual metaphor. The Spanish expression "casa despoblada" means "abandoned house," suggesting an *absence* (mysterious, but part of the tradition). The English "haunted house," on the other hand, suggests a *presence*. If we look back in the poem, we see that several elements from the oral tradition are expressed in their familiar Spanish terms. But the final stanza, completely in English except for "bruja," we expect by contrast to return us to the logical world. It does just the opposite. Second, the metaphor in the last stanza reminds one immediately of Native American style, where the mythic, spiritual world is juxtaposed on the personal world. There are mysteries that science and logic cannot touch, and Quintana evokes his culture's version of them, and his people's response to them as a reminder of how much personal dignity we have lost in a world where even people have become things to be manipulated by bureaucracies, clocks, television and video games. We have lost the experience of mystery; we have lost our souls.

The final poem of *Sangre* makes this abundantly clear. Using the ancient Spanish terms for the four directions, and making the sign of the Catholic cross with them the speaker's grandfather teaches him true knowledge. However, the custom of teaching the directions as the "center of the world"—a spiritual center, not a geographical one—is distinctly Native American, not Hispanic. His "legacy" comes from both cultures:

#### "A Legacy"

Grandfather never went to school  
spoke only a few words of English,  
a quiet man; when he talked  
talked about simple things

planting corn or about the weather  
sometimes about herding sheep as a child.  
One day pointed to the four directions  
taught me their names

	El Norte	
Poniente		Oriente
	El Sur	

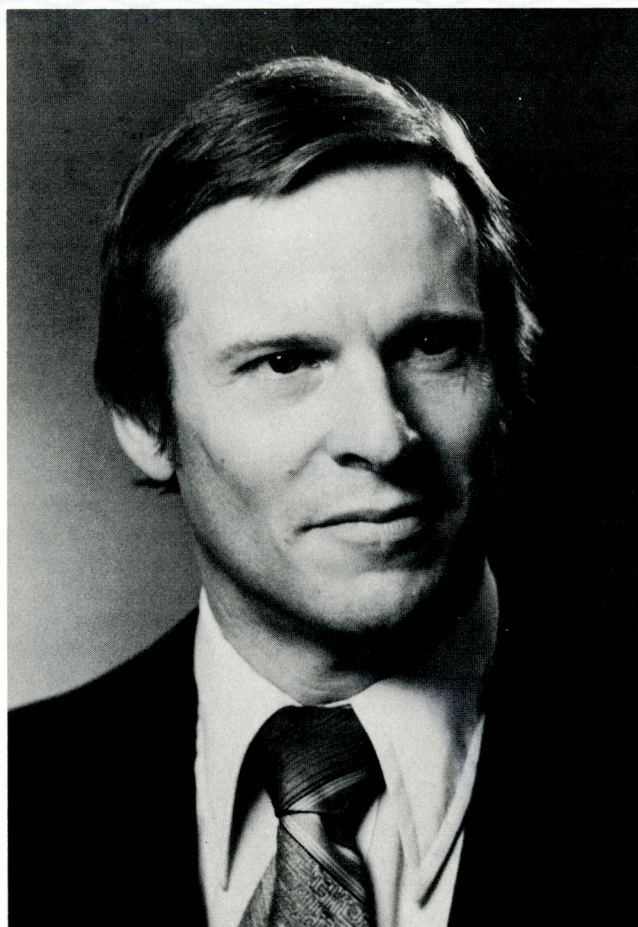
He spoke their names as if they were  
one of only a handful of things  
a man needed to know

Now I look back  
only two generations removed  
realize I am nothing but a poor fool  
who went to college

trying to find my way back  
to the center of the world  
where Grandfather stood  
that day

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