The Images of Miguel Mendez M.

There exists in Chicano literature both an external and an internal preoccupation with the past. I might add that it is not mere nostalgia brought about through a disillusionment with what has happened, nor a disorientation within a value system, nor the exploding of the myth of a moral government; but, rather, it is a ritual from which to derive and maintain a sense of humanity—a ritual of cleansing and a prophecy.

—Tomás Rivera

Miguel Mendez M. is the author of the novel Peregrinos de Aztlán. He also wrote a long poem titled “Taller de Imágenes, Pase” (“Workshop for Images, Come in”). One critic calls this work “la obra barroca de Miguel M.” The complexity and richness of the images would seem to justify this judgment, its conceptual richness and its ideological content is contrary to the classic notion of baroque poetry. If we consider the long poem, “La fabula de Polifemo y Galatea,” written by Luis de Góngora in the first decade of the seventeenth century as a paradigm of the baroque poem, we realize that denotive matter in it is really superfluous, because intensity of connotations substitutes for conceptual depth. Baroque poetry “is art for art’s sake.”

The workshop is a poem which deals with the problems of the world in a manner that approaches that of mythology because it is an explanation in images and not in abstractions. The consequences of this are richer and more immediate meaning, and also a self-sufficiency that defies attempts to reduce the poem to unambiguous theories.

The complexity and density of the poem are due to the use of surrealist imagery, but not all the images in “Workshop” are surrealist. Such a non-surrealist image is essentially metaphor and as a result redundant. It serves to elaborate by making an implicit comparison. For example: . . . “your doves winging to the nests of my hands” (p. 68). This image is used to compare the softness of the woman’s breasts to the plumage of a dove and the form of a cupped hand to that of a nest.

The surrealist image on the other hand has no simple one-to-one correspondence between the mentioned and the signified, because it is a juxtaposition of completely unrelated objects that creates a new object such as the image of the following type: “Among the barbs of a fence I saw a beheaded sheep; crane and black veils over blue eyes. Dust of the sky.” (p. 67). This type of metaphor serves (to borrow a notion which Levi-Strauss uses to explain the function of mythology) to mediate contradictory and painful realities. It is in this way that we should understand Riveria’s designation of the Chicano writer’s preoccupation with the past as a ritual. It is a way to resolve contradictions not by synthesis which cancels both sides of the dialectic, but by providing a new image and at the same time retaining the individuality of each element.

In the case of the above image, and a significant number of images in “Workshop,” the two elements which are set side by side are either organic or mechanical. The nature of the symbols is related to the central conflict or essential opposition between a primitive vision of the cosmos and an industrial orientation to the world. Another example: “In the cornfield I saw a foal at the moment of gestation, within the matrix of the mare: Steam locomotives copulating before crowds at the station.” (p. 67). This opposition of images presupposes a perspective other than the pragmatic one of the train engineer. This view is not an innovation of Mendez, it is his identification with the Indian-Mexican man who is in touch with the earth.

The conflict which Mendez develops is a recurring aspect of “Chicanismo.” Armando Rendon writes, “My people have come in fulfillment of a cosmic cycle from ancient Aztlán, characterized by the progeny of our Indian, Mexican, and Spanish ancestors.” The identification with the past is for many Chicanos part and parcel of the claim to cultural integrity and heritage. The Indian view of the world is one which the past glorifies and the present denies. The respect for nature based upon an understanding of the unity of beings is a paradigmatic of a superior being who must conquer nature.

As such, the richness of imagery in “Workshop” has its roots in the awareness of nature which Mendez shares with Indian people. It is reminiscent of the attitude of the “warrior” Don Juan who tries to teach Carlos Castaneda to talk to plants and to recognize that just as he feeds off a rabbit, the earth will feed off him at the time of his death.

The ritualistic quality of the poem can be illustrated by the way the author merges the fertility of the earth with the fecundity of human beings through the use of erotic images, a type of poetic imagination also found in Garcia Lorca’s works Yerma and Bodas de Sangre. For example: “Yellow with cocoa, rotted melons, coconuts with...
nall lament of the poet. It is heard in Yevtushenko’s “Babi Yar,” in Pablo Neruda’s Canto General, and in Robert Bly’s exorcism of the teeth mother in his poem against the war in Viet-Nam. The second type of pain is alienation from our brothers and from ourselves. It is the state of being of those stifled by repression whose words are wind against the bars of solitude: “My tongue is a bell clapper made of sponges, within a belted made of gauze; echoes drowned in the trajectories on uninhabited planets, words that disperse and disappear on the sharp edges of frozen questions.” (p. 73). Mendez ends the poem with a beautiful dance of fertility which affirms in a fusion of agriculture and sexuality the eternal truth of the peasant, and which recalls the sacredness of the planting of maize as recorded in the Popol-Vuh of the ancient Maya-Quiché, a fitting tribute to the past.

Robert R. Quiroz

Notes
2Miguel Mendez M., “Taller de Imágenes, Poema.” (The title of the English translation by the editor is “Workshop for Images, Come in.” All references to this work are to the following anthology: Octavio Ignacio Remusio-Vizoso, El Espacio: The Mirror: Selected Mexican-American Literature: Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, second printing, 1975.)

Un Nuevo Corrido
Este es el nuevo corrido
Que aunque tenga su respiro
Que todos los mexicanos
Nos vamos volviendo gringos
Ya las inditas del pueblo
Se maquillan con caliche
Y si les dices bonitas
Te dicen son-ova-viche
Y si te buscan pelea
Meten de gallo a su broder
Y te dan mentiras a tu oido
Te rompen toda la moder
Cuando vayas a los estados
Y te encuentres en muy malas
Haz lo que quieras hermano
Nomas no vayas a Dallas
Y los inditos del pueblo
Te dicen “forza-one”
Y si te deciden cargajo
Te dicen son-ova-viche
—ánimico

Contributed from the Song Collection of Ramon Salinas Johnston
Tenocelome: The Jaguar Mouth People

Approximately 1200 B.C. on the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico in an area encompassing 6,200-7,000 square miles that would comprise southeastern Veracruz and Western Tabasco,1 the cornerstone of Meso-American civilization was set by a people called the Olmec. The Olmec civilization, the most ancient and most recently covered civilization of Meso-America, has the distinct honor of being the antecedent, the very mother culture from which every other great culture of Meso-America sprang.

The Zapotec of Monte Albán, the people who built and lived at the great city of Monte Albán and at the site of Tula, and the Aztec of the Valley of Mexico, all were influenced by the Olmec and inherited and embellished many of their traits,2 which ranged from a numbering system (mistakenly credited to the Maya) to the art of sculpture.

It is in the latter, sculpture, where the Olmec reigns supreme. The Olmec were the finest sculptors Meso-America produced. The quality and style of their work remains unsurpassed to this day and ranks with some of the best sculpture produced in the world.

From Pánuco in northern Mexico to the Juxtlahuaca Caverns of Guerrero on the Pacific and as far south as El Salvador, the Tenocelome, the “Jaguar Mouth People,” the Olmec, journeyed leaving their mark in the form of sculpture that ranged in size and style from the colossal heads of La Venta and Tres Zapotes in their heartland in monoliths, altars, steles, and tiny clay and jade figurines found at such sites as Tlachtic in the Valley of Mexico.

Hegemonic to the Olmec style is its exquisite aesthetic ideal. Olmec art does not depict reality but rather an interpretation of it. The body is that of a sexless, obese human being. Humans, some representing pathological human figures, stylized jaguars, plus an infinitely varied combination of human and jaguar, embrace the mass of Olmec subject material. The concept of the were-jaguar is central to Olmec art and was part of Olmec myth: the origin of part human, part feline beings resulting from the union of a woman and jaguar. A monument from Preterio Nuevo points to such a belief. This monument shows a woman copulating with a jaguar. The were-jaguar is typically shown with narrow oval eyes, inconsiderably crossed with full size or eccentrically placed pupils; above the eyes is extensive flame-like brows, a bared notched head from which may rise another or floral form. The nose is flat, the corners of the were-jaguar’s mouth are turned down in the form of a snout or cry, the upper lip is prominent and shaped like the top half of a heart with the mouth toothless.3 On occasion, long feline canine fangs may curve down and out from the upper gums, some of which have notched ends. Variations of the jaguar motif form a whole galaxy of were-jaguars shifting in style and delineation from the straightforward were-jaguar to personages with just slight traces of jaguar features.4

The notion of the were-jaguar may have been affiliated with rain or perhaps fertility. The former notion may be somewhat doubtful because of the location of the Olmec heartland in dense tropical jungles circumscribed by rivers to the east and west which were constantly flooding. Also, the majority of the heartland was in savannahs and swamps, an area with a very high density of rainfall. Nonetheless, the jaguar is found in this type of environment and does most of its hunting along water areas. Also, the jaguar is an adept swimmer. The were-jaguar as rain god cannot be ruled out. It may have acquired this distinction as time progressed. Evidence of the were-jaguar as rain god has been put forward by the late Mexican artist/archeologist Miguel Covarrubias. He constructed a family tree in which all the well-known rain gods of Meso-America may be traced back to the Olmec were-jaguar: Chac of the Maya, Tainj of the Tonotac, Dzabui of the Mixtec, Cencue of the Zapotec, and Tlacolt of the Aztec.5 In addition, all of these rain gods were lightning divinities.

Igancio Bernal, famous Mexican archeologist, takes the Olmec concept of the were-jaguar one step further into a realm that we would consider fanciful. He associates the were-jaguar with Chanaques, Chanaques, which people in Mexico still believe in today, are dwarfs with faces resembling those of children, who inhabit waterfalls. They are a source of bother for women, are the cause of innumerable illnesses, devour the human brain, predict rain, and rule over the world of the wild animal and fish. Chanaques are also sorcerers and in order to allay them a person must throw them buckets of water, the magic food.6 Small figures surrounding the central personages on Stela 2 and St. La Venta have been identified as Chanaques carrying cayes in their hands to break the clouds. Chanaques may be related to Tlaloques and Chacs, assistants to the rain gods Tlaco and Chac who also break with canes the “jars,” or clouds, that contain the rain water.7 Thus, one may assess that the were-jaguar was not only central to Olmec art but it also played an important role in their belief system as well. With the other cultural traits of the Olmec, the cultures which proceedied it were either directly or indirectly influenced by an Olmec theme or elaborated on it according to their artistic or religious needs.

The dubitation of the antiquity and grandeur of the Olmec culture has been cast aside by the consequent research of Stirling, Drucker, Heizer, Pina Chan, Covarrubias, until his death in 1957, and Dr. D. D. Rumsey, who have brought to the surface, for all the world to see, the obscurity of an Olmec style which defines the present of its own.

The Olmec, the “Jaguar Mouth People,” the oldest civilization of Meso-America, have left for us today a sculpture style which has no equal lies in the New World. Through the medium of basalt, andesite, magritite, serpentine, jade, and jadeite, these ancient sculptors created works of art that rival the imagination and artistic creativity of the artist today.

One can appreciate the art style of the Olmec by understanding what these people created without the use of modern art tools: hollow figurines modeled without the use of a mould, figurines of precious polished stones that stand free in space and time, giant colossal heads weighing several tons made from basalt and cutinite which were located in areas where stone was abundant and brought from as far away as sixty-five miles without the use of wheeled vehicles, steles that were void of the ornament-gatherer typical of Maya art, pyramids constructed out of clay with each layer a different color from the one that preceded it, and a huge mosaic of a jaguar face (an offering to some god) with each block weighing several hundred pounds and adding up to tons of precious serpentine.

One could go on and praising the art work of these people, yet I doubt that this is what motivated them to create what they did. We can only wonder with awe at the Olmec art style expressed through the form of sculpture. The Tenocelome unquestionably were true artists in their own right.

Zaragosa Vargas

Notes
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

Photo by G. Vargas

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