Alfredo Véa's Narrative Trilogy:

Studies on *La Maravilla*, *The Silver Cloud Café*, and *Gods Go Begging*

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By

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For

Stella Rose

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INTRODUCTION

Un puñado de palabras sueñan contigo.
Cúbrelas bien o despiértalas.
Aquí tú eres noche y día, estrella y gallo.
—Octavio Armand, *Concierto para delinquir* (23).

I

Weeks after the April 1993 release of *La Maravilla,* I received a copy from the publisher requesting that I review Alfredo Véa's premier novel. I agreed to the review, and asked Dutton for Véa's telephone number. As I read *La Maravilla*, and after the initial telephone communications with Alfredo (as I call him), the review seemed insubstantial, generically bound to vague impressions, thus inadequate. I had other options: the editors of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Chicano Writers*, had published Volume I ("First Series") in 1989, and Volume II ("Second Series") in 1992. In this second volume, I had published essays on Texas-born novelists Arturo Islas (1938-1991), and Eliud Martínez (1935-2020). I had agreed to contribute to Volume III of the *DLB* series on Chicano Writers, therefore an essay on *La Maravilla* in such volume seemed to be the better choice. During our conversations, however, Alfredo informed me that a sequel to *La Maravilla* was in the making. He proceeded to sketch the main lineaments of the plot and storyline. That same evening, I decided to write the essay on both novels--part biography, part literary criticism--to be included in the *DLB*'s third series.

Our telephone communications continued and in early 1995 I received the first draft of Alfredo's second novel, "The Silver Cloud Café," asking that I return the manuscript with my comments on the margins. After its return and further communications, another surprise followed: Alfredo had in mind a trilogy of novels, coming forth from memory (thus to be autobiographical), nonetheless, to be a work of art and the imagination. The initial project of a book review, as I immediately realized, would be a much longer piece. When given a deadline for the

third series by *DLB* editors, I would either submit an essay on Alfredo's two novels or, hopefully, on the trilogy.[1]

We finally met face to face in Los Angeles during the presentation of *The Silver Cloud Café* at the Book Soup store in Hollywood (October 25, 1996). He was not at the bookstore when I arrived; Alfredo had preferred to speak to a gathering of his readers in a bistro located steps away. I found him in the company of a dozen or so of his readers and fans, alertly listening to the novelist's words. As I walked in, Alfredo pointed to a nearby chair he had saved for me. Instead of the announced book presentation, Alfredo's theme was the literature of the Deep South, with references to Harper Lee, Carson McCullers, among others. Expecting mostly a Chicano audience, Alfredo found instead a crowd of welcoming white American readers holding copies of *La Maravilla* and *The Silver Cloud Café* for him to sign. At the time I was drafting an article on Montserrat Fontes whose family on her matrilineal and patrilineal branches had lived in northern Sonora since the late eighteenth century. She knew the literature of the South, which Fontes considers to be similar to Sonora's history, the former with its plantations and the enslavement of Black people, while Sonora is remembered for Mexico's occupation of northern regions--from Sonora and Chihuahua to Nuevo León and Tamaulipas--and for the enslavement of the native Yaqui nation during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). As preparation for my article, I had been reading Harper Lee and Cormac McCarthy (Fontes' favorite Southern novelists) and had recently read McCullers' novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). I recognized the moment as an auspicious opportunity to observe and attend to Alfredo's interpretation of Southern literature.

With no interruption while greeting me and addressing his young audience, Alfredo spoke at length about Carson McCullers whose birth name, he clarified, was Lula Carson Smith (1917-1967). He then turned to her novel *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), continuing with a summary, and sweeping view of the writer's life, her writings, and her abhorrence of the pretensions of white racial superiority deeply lodged in the hearts of people born in the South. Alfredo's condensed and lucid portrait of

[1] My contribution to *DLB* on Alfredo Véa encompassed his narrative trilogy, as well as other essays on novelists Montserrat Fontes (Texas, 1940), and Joe D. Rodríguez (Hawaii, 1943). The essays were published in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Chicano Writers, Third Series, edited by Francisco A. Lomelí and Carl R. Shirley (1999). I had read "Gods Go Begging" in draft form, thus allowing me to submit my essays to the editors of *DLB* in late 1998. Now, almost thirty years later, I am retracing my steps to what began as the promise of a book review.

McCullers as a writer gave full expression to her utopian search for an absolute in art, particularly the one that is accessed through the ear, the eye, and the mind, such as music, literature, and dialogue. I was not surprised: Alfredo read novels with the intuition and insight of a novelist, not as an academically trained literary critic, a waning guild where I feel at home.

After the book-signing and another round of wine with his animated audience, I asked him what it would take to bring him to Cal State LA as a featured speaker. His presentation, I told him, would be the highlight of a festival of literary journals I was organizing at the time, to take place in the Winter Quarter 1997. "A good bottle of wine with my meals, and you and a group of your students as company," he replied, adding that he would cover the costs of his airfare, car rental, and hotel. On March 8, 1997, Alfredo landed early at the Burbank Airport and drove straight to Cal State LA. He spoke to a campus audience for one hour about his life in the Arizona desert, where he was taught by his grandparents to live with few needs; recalled memories of his work as a teenager in California's agricultural fields; his tour of duty in Vietnam (1967-1969); and presently, of his daily life as a criminal defense attorney in San Francisco, writing novels in his spare time. It was a "coming of age" story not foreign to my students and colleagues but told in a language and point of view that combined eloquence and a vivid precision of detail. After Alfredo's presentation and a Q & A period, a group of students and colleagues joined us for dinner, including *Tejano* novelist Eliud Martínez (UC Riverside). Alfredo would return in Fall 1999 shortly after the publication of *Gods Go Begging*, his Vietnam novel. It was another memorable and well-attended presentation, followed by a shared meal and wine with students and colleagues in a South Pasadena restaurant.[2]

[2] Before his flight back to San Francisco the following day, I addressed the topic of an Alfredo Véa Archive to be housed at the University Library at Cal State LA. I knew that renowned writers received substantial sums for their manuscripts, so I asked Alfredo to consider the sale and the amount. Days later contacts were made with the head librarian, followed by Alfredo's agreement to donate the manuscripts of his narrative trilogy to the University Library as a gift, thus at no cost. The *Alfredo Véa Archives*, *1994-1999* are kept at the University Library, California State University, Los Angeles. The special collection consists of nine boxes (4.5 cubic feet) of manuscripts (typescripts) for three novels: *La Maravilla* (1993), *The Silver Cloud Café* (1996), and *Gods Go Begging* (1999). The typescripts are corrected and edited by the author. Also included are notes and comments by others. Source of acquisition: Gift, Alfredo Véa, Jr.

Days after his campus presentation, Alfredo wrote: "Roberto: amigo, I went down to Cultura Latina in Long Beach and had a great time. I was amazed to hear the same dialogue going on down there: Chicano literature needs to move on […] I could not believe how stultified and stuck it is...as though an artist in Soweto did not know that a black man had become president […] We have let the issues slip away from us. How can we tackle racism when we can't even defend a life of the mind? How can we tackle racism...raise the public discourse when the minds of our listeners are shrinking right before our eyes? The old question of why should Chicanos read Joseph Conrad has become: Why should anyone read anything? I expect your thoughts. The discourse must be built" (email message, dated 11 October 1999). Véa's use of language is both ironic and revealing, despite its spontaneous construction in an electronic message, opening with "had a great time" and "amazed," followed by "the same dialogue," "needs to move on," "stultified." This last word, from Latin *stultus*, meaning unsound of mind, uneducated, dull, obtuse, and foolish talk. Thus, Alfredo's questions and expected reply.

This book is one more attempt to build the discourse proposed long ago by Alfredo Véa. As an enabling background for the task ahead, I have relied on more than twenty years of memories, email communications, and face to face conversations with Alfredo. During such dialogues I did not take notes, instead I followed his reasoning, style of argumentation, and modes of inference, one being his idea of language and communication orphaned and destitute of metaphor, symbol, and literary reference. Other inroads into his novels took place over many years in lectures and class discussions in literature courses I taught in the Department of Chicano Studies (as it was known from 1971 to 2016), and in the Department of English at Cal State LA. Teaching Véa's novels in Chicano and English literature courses, with the inevitable student differentiation in modes of reading by way of disciplinary specialization, required that I lecture and comment on Andrew Marvell's poetry or on Andrea Mantegna's Renaissance paintings in courses attended mostly by Chicano Studies majors; conversely, that I explore and explain Yaqui culture and rites of initiation, as described in *La Maravilla*, in lectures and discussions with students majoring in English and U.S. literatures. In this book I have in mind a similar method of defamiliarization, frequently found in Véa's novels, a displacement from the customary, launching the reader in pursuit of a literary experience accessible to various forms of readers, either implied, ideal, or active, a mode of reading to be illustrated below.

II

In this book's opening chapters, the reader will note the insertion of Excursus I (Véa's background in the modern Latin American novel), and Excursus II (Véa's intertextual threading of the English high Renaissance poetry of Andrew Marvell throughout *La Maravilla*), meant as inroads into Alfredo Véa's novels and their close affiliations to world literary traditions beyond the United States and Mexico. In the 1980s, writers of what was then known as Chicana and Chicano narrative fiction made headway by crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in readings of masterful and innovative novelists (Agustín Yáñez, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes), on occasions venturing south to Argentina (Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges) in search of new forms in storytelling that were creating a global readership in Spanish, French, and in English translations.[3] This inclination toward deprovincialization through visionary sources, traditionally judged as influences or as the vassalage of authors in the Western world over writers and artists with literary or artistic traditions that seemingly lack canonical standing, has taken different forms. In *After Babel* (1975), George Steiner disputed the conventional notion of influences, turning instead to literary history by way of *interanimation*.[4]

In Steiner's words, interanimation reveals a "common source" and the "magnetism" of an assumed ideal in narrative forms (456; see also 453-454). For example, in his biography of Leo Tolstoy, Henri Troyat writes that by September 1867 Tolstoy had completed the first three volumes of his book on Napoleon's invasion of Russia; had on his desk the "accursed proofs to read" (296); and had a "horrible fog in the head" (296). He felt unhappy with the provisional title *War and Peace*, taken from a recent tract by Proudhon. Originally to be titled *1805,* Tolstoy had also found it inadequate for a book that concluded in 1812, so what title to choose? (296). Tolstoy chose *All's Well That Ends Well*, from Shakespeare's play, assuming it would give his book "the casual, romantic tone of a long English novel" (Troyat 296). Although Tolstoy refused to

[3] Alfredo Véa's inaugural novel, *La Maravilla*, has been translated into German by Sylvia Morawetz under the title *La Maravilla: Roman* (2018).

[4] Steiner explains his concept of "interanimation" according to a shared theme: "the education of a young man through thwarted love of a married woman" (457-458). Steiner studies this theme in novels such as *Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), by Rousseau; *Werther* (1774), by Goethe; *Volupté* (1834), by Sainte-Beuve; *Le lys dans la vallée* (1836), by Balzac; and *A Sentimental Education* (1869), by Flaubert (457-460). Steiner explains interanimation as evidence of a "common source" and the "magnetism" of an assumed ideal in narrative forms (456; see also 453-454).

call his work "a novel" (Troyat 303), while he dwelled on said concerns his publisher--free of fog and fatigue--released *War and Peace* on 17 December 1867. Happy and with a clear mind, Tolstoy wrote the fourth volume of *War and Peace*, with copies received in May 1868 (297). The reader might ask, why would Tolstoy, who had previously expressed contempt toward Shakespeare for being only a "phrase-maker" (131), consider *All's Well That Ends Well* as a title? In the late 1890s, according to Troyat, "Shakespeare was still [Tolstoy's] pet hate," revolted by *King Lear*'s "affectation" (512). In 1903, after years of feuding with the English playwright, Tolstoy published an essay on Shakespeare, claiming to have reread his best plays, all along feeling "an overpowering repugnance, a boundless tedium" (577). Troyat's authoritative biography does not discuss nor clarify the disparity between Tolstoy's views on Shakespeare and his earlier choice of *All's Well That Ends Well* as the title for what became the masterpiece of Tolstoy's life as a writer. As a biographer, Troyat displays exceptional insights into his subject, at times writing like a novelist, drawing us close to Tolstoy's desires, dreams, and contradictions as riddles of being, thus for the reader to solve.

Generally judged as one of Shakespeare's "problem" and "darker" comedies (McEachern 565), *All's Well That Ends Well* offers a glimpse into Tolstoy's creative imagination, fed, and sustained by Russian history, Tolstoy's family background, and the nexus to the theme in *War and Peace*: namely, Russia's stand against Napoleon's invading army. Behind the curtains of Shakespeare's play a war is in fact being waged between Florence and Siena, with France and Austria as Florence's allies (Act I, scene 2). Coincidentally, this military conflict recurs in permutation mode in the opening pages of *War and Peace*, with France now as the aggressor, followed by Russia's entry into a coalition of self-defence (1805-1806) that included England, Austria, and the Italian cities of Naples and Sicily (Book One, Chapter 23: 122). When Tolstoy was writing what became *War and Peace*, he was reliving his participation in the Crimean War (1853-1856), triggered when Tsar Nicholas I was expanding the Russian empire by grabbing lands from the Ottoman Empire, resulting in a counter-coalition of England, France, and Sardinia on the side of Turkey. In such a setting, the synchrony of events in Russian history, on the theme of history repeating itself, creates a reading experience of mordant irony when considered in relation to Ukraine's current stand against Russia's military invasion (2022-2023). The historical parallels between Shakespeare's play, *War and Peace*, and Russian history can thus be interpreted at a symbolic level: in *All's Well That Ends Well,* the King of France is terminally ill, a malady that one can

read as a metaphor for a waning and diseased nobility, represented in Shakespeare's play by Bertram, Count of Rossillion, a French nobleman in the service of Florence's army, but notorious for a life of license and dissipation. Helena, the lowly-born daughter of a physician, and silently in love with Bertram, claims she can restore the King of France to good health (Act I, scene iii); she asks, however, "if I help, what do you promise me?" (Act II, scene i). The reader is not surprised to learn that Helena is the victim of a malady of her own: she loves the Count of Rossillion, although fully aware of the social distance between them ("he is so above me/ in his bright radiance and collateral light," Act I, scene i). The king orders the nuptials, the marriage takes place, but Bertram refuses to consummate the marriage ("Although before the solemn priest I have sworn, I will not bed her," Act III, scene iii). Instead, Betram flees to Florence with a campaign of maiden seductions. Helena, not to be abandoned, follows Bertram disguised as a pilgrim, on the trail of her wayward husband.

Troyat's profile of the young Tolstoy is traced with a variant model in mind: Saint Augustine, his temptations of the flesh, and his nightly prayers and promises of an eventual chastity. Quoting from Tolstoy's diary, Troyat draws us closer to his inner battles: "I could not feel my own body. I was pure spirit. And then, the wretched carnal side took over again, and hardly an hour later I was listening to the voices of vice" (77). During his youth Count Tolstoy led a life of gambling (cards, roulette), was tormented by the guilt of frequent visits to Romani dancers and Cossack women, and remorseful after subsequent visits to doctors for contracted diseases, such as venereal infections (86). To mend his ways, Count Tolstoy served unofficially in the Russian army in the Caucasus, followed by his transfer to the Crimea as a second lieutenant, assigned to the 14th Artillery Brigade where he fought in the trenches and faced French soldiers and his own fears of death inspired by the bravery of his fellow Russian soldiers (Troyat 114-115). One published account of these experiences was titled *Sevastopol in December* (1855), considered the first report on the "reality of war" in Russian history (Troyat 124). More than one hundred years later, Alfredo Véa would report on the "reality" of the Vietnam war in his novel *Gods Go Begging* (1999). Sevastopol taught Tolstoy a lesson: most of the Russian generals were incompetent, chosen by Nicolas I for their servility; to Tolstoy's rage, such aristocratic officers were the cause of the needless deaths of thousands of Russian soldiers because of ill-advised war plans, obsolete and defective weapons, with Russian soldiers fighting with muskets while the French, educated about politics and the art of war, were armed with rifles, therefore the Russians' "high opinion of the enemy" (116).

Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* thus raises the question, why is it considered a "problem" and one of Shakespeare's "darker comedies"? Scholars such as Claire McEachern judges Helena to be guilty of "female perfidy" (568), while Shakuntala Jayaswal focuses on the "morally ambiguous" title: "the heroine [Helena] has tricked the hero into staying with her. That the hero cannot distinguish between Diana, the woman he ostensibly desires, and Helena the wife he has rejected, is *unromantic*, at the very least" (1999: 74, my emphasis). The moral ambiguity of the title would be, in Jayaswal's judgment "that all—including the means—is justified by the end" (*Ibid.*). As is generally the case, Shakespeare's plays can be read from various possible angles: for instance, a "trickster" like Bertram (a name that means "bright raven") would deserve to be "tricked" or ensnared into consummation of marriage vows with Helena, his lawful wife, who turns the traditional name of an adulterous wife (Helen of Troy) into a dutiful, resolute, and ingenious spouse. The irony in Helena's depiction of Bertram's "bright radiance and collateral light" is not lost on the reader: Bertram believes he has seduced a Florentine maiden named Diana, a name with direct associations with the goddess of light, the moon (hence madness), and the maiden deity of the bow and the chase, as well as of healing. Like her brother Apollo, Diana is the maiden-goddess never seduced by love, hence her *unmarried* condition (Robert Graves 41). Shakespeare's punning with meanings of names and with English Renaissance mythic images dating back to classical antiquity, would clear his play of its alleged category as a "problem" and "darker comedy." In other words, the accusation of Helena's "female perfidy," and the play's title charged as being morally ambiguous, would absolve Betram of moral turpitude, an ethical flaw recognized by his mother, his father, and the king himself: "Thou speak'st falsely, as I love mine honor […] Take him away" (Act V, scene iii).

Writing on Tolstoy's courtship of Sofyia Behrs as a variant of love and war, Troyat treats with humor and irony the image of female cunning on the theme of Woman as Eve. Prior to their marriage, Tolstoy had thought up his own idea of love: he would not look for beauty alone; a self-respecting person, he claimed, should marry someone "able, above else, to help him *improve himself*" (Troyat 46, my emphasis). Always the trusted guide, Troyat alerts the reader to Tolstoy's fated engagement: during the initial stages of their courtship, Tolstoy had learned from Sonya (Sofya) that she had written a story, and asked to read it, sensing near him a kindred soul. Tolstoy did not suspect that his beloved held a fishing rod, or deck of cards stacked against the bearded count. In Troyat's words: "Little Sonya had played the right card when she showed him her story. Now, every wriggle

he gave to shake the hook loose only drove it deeper into his flesh […] He was frightened by the fullness of his love *as by a disease*" (243, 245, my emphasis). Tolstoy's turning from gambler and fearless soldier to married man occurred when he fell in love with Sofya Behrs, the daughter of a Moscow physician.[5] Years later, Tolstoy's idea of love and marriage as a means to self-improvement would question Shakespeare's characterization of Helena's love of Bertram after hearing his conditional statement, namely: that if Helena can prove he "bedded" her, that he would "love her dearly—ever, ever dearly," Act V, scene iii).[6] As the reader knows at this point in the play, a more powerful threat weighed on Betram's fate: the king had sent him to prison for his ignoble actions, subsequently ordering his return to face Helena, who agreed to a divorce if truth was not on her side. Thus, at the end of the play Betram has not been "cured" of his folly and deceitful ways.[7] So perhaps Helena is not the thematic core of Shakespeare's play, after all; it would seem that Bertram represents, as his noble father fears, "younger spirits, whose apprehensive senses / All but new things disdain […] whose constancies/ Expire before their fashions" (Act I, scene ii). The theme of political decline and corruption had as its immediate contrast a generational difference, embodied by Bertram's noble father whose actions were considered noble in the sense of his belief in justice and fairness for

[5] Sofyia Behrs' father was initially opposed to his daughter's marriage to Tolstoy based on age differences: Tolstoy was 34 years old, Sofya was only eighteen. The father, however, was convinced by Mrs. Behrs with an argument based on their social and economic differences: "She pointed out that with their large family and slender resources they had no right to reject a rich, talented, and *noble suitor*" (247, my emphasis).

[6] After Crimea, Tolstoy returned to civilian life as a writer admired in Russia by ordinary readers as well as by famous writers as the hero of Sevastopol. One admirer was Ivan Turgenev, praised in turn by Tolstoy in a literary world divided between Westerners who embraced European art and democracy, and Slavophils, reactionaries who boasted of Russia's old Slavic traditions and their adoration of the tsar. Tolstoy did not fit in either group. After being lionized for reasons Tolstoy did not respect, he refused to join literary cliques and blocs. Troyat thus casts light, although indirectly, on Tolstoy's expressed contempt toward Shakespeare, Homer, and other famed poets. In Troyat's words: "Tolstoy's need to contradict everyone else was becoming second nature to him. It was as though, by systematic opposition, he might prove his own existence to himself. He seemed to say, 'I think—the opposite of everyone else—therefore I am'" (130).

[7] Reflecting on the theme of sexual infidelity and the "disasters of marriage," George Steiner points to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as a response, based on "close experience and partial denial," to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, novels aligned as a cluster of interactive "mutual cognizance" (456).

everyone: "Who were below him [he] bowed his eminent top to their low ranks / Making them proud of his humility" Act I, Scene ii).

It has been observed in Shakespeare studies that *All's Well That Ends Well* was written in 1602-1604, thus overlapping with King James' royal accession in 1603. In his introduction to *Measure for Measure* (1604), Jonathan Crewe writes that King James' claim to absolute monarchy led to Shakespeare's extended and ironic portrayals of "a seamy, disease-ridden society [in Shakespeare's] own time and place" (525). *Measure for Measure* would thus mark the transition from Elizabethan to Jacobean England, and yet the play--as Crewe acknowledges--is set in Vienna, therefore ruled in real time by the Spanish-born Archduke of Austria, Ferdinand I (1503-1564), the younger brother of Charles V (1500-1558), Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, who retired to the Monastery of Yuste in 1557 where he died a year later "holding the crucifix which his wife Isabel had held when she died" (Kamen 65).

Charles had spent the last years of his life in religious and political wars, first against Protestants, then against France and the Ottoman Empire (Kamen 138). Before his death, Charles saw the Hapsburg dynasty reaching English shores when his son Philip II (1527-1598) married Queen Mary I (the Catholic "Bloody Mary") and rose as the King of England and Ireland (1554-1558). Shakespeare was born six years after Mary Tudor's death, growing up with the knowledge that not long-ago England had been part of the Spanish Empire. In *Measure for Measure*, the Duke Vincentio--from Latin *vincentius*, meaning to conquer, to fight, to overcome—deputizes Angelo to rule over morally-declining Vienna on his behalf ("your scope is as mine own / So to enforce or qualify the laws," Act I, scene i). Angelo becomes a tyrant; Isabella, a novice about to take her vows, intervenes on behalf of Claudio, her imprisoned brother; to Isabella's indignation, she is sexually desired by Angelo. In the meantime, Duke Vincentio has left the city disguised as a friar, but returns to witness Angelo's abuse of power, revealing himself as the duke, gaining Isabella's hand in marriage: Isabel, Isabella, a name cognate with the Queen of Castile, *Isabel la Católica*. In the end, it is likely that *Measure for Measure* was Shakespeare's coded warning to James I, not to hand power to a "trusted deputy," and to shield his reign from further religious wars.

III

In preparation for this book, I reviewed essays I had published between 1997 and 2004 on Alfredo Véa's novels, written in theme-oriented journals

or volumes on Chicano/Latino literature, with the usual limit of twenty pages or less. I soon realized that said articles did not fit into the book I had in mind. There was one exception: my essay on *The Silver Cloud Café*, published in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* (Volume 25, Number 1, Winter 2001: 210-245). Charles Tatum, the special issue's guest editor, had allowed me to draft an essay long enough for me to analyze and interpret Véa's second novel comprehensively. I thank Charles Tatum and Laura Kanost (editor) for their collegial permission to reprint my former essay, herein rewritten in part and expanded. Everything else has been written expressively for this book. I would also like to thank Adam Rummens, my liaison, and Commissioning Editor at Cambridge Scholars, for his attention to all matters related to my book's progress. The gratitude also extended to Amanda Millar (Typesetting Manager); Sophie Edminson (Cover Designer who welcomed my choice of cover art), and Finley Haunch (Book Reviews Editor). As always, my heartfelt thanks and love to my wife Elvira and to our three grown-up children--Victoria Guadalupe, Isabel, and Roberto--for letting me hide in my quiet corner at home, so I could write, with a minimum of distractions, on Alfredo Véa's narrative trilogy.

LA MARAVILLA

PART ONE:

FORMS THAT PERSIST

1. On Being and Becoming

It would justify a whole lifetime to write one good book.
—Tolstoy, *Diary*, 17 August 1852 (Troyat 93).

Unlike other novelists who discover their calling in early youth, Alfredo Véa at age nine dreamed of being a physicist like Albert Einstein. Traces of this ambition run through *La Maravilla* (1993), assuring readers that such extravagant dreams—even when considered impossible—are worthier than the American version. In the end, people "were not created to just eat and own things" (220). As is the case in unusual biographical circumstances—for instance, Véa's life background—personal will and native wit allow people to transcend the bounds of the relative and typical. Véa was born on 28 June 1950 to a thirteen-year-old mother in a squatter tract then known as Buckeye Road, an unincorporated area on the fringes of Phoenix, Arizona. Months before Véa's birth, his father left, never to return. Years later his mother entrusted her parents with her son's care, resolved as a single Mexican American mother to seek her economic future in California's agricultural fields.

In Véa's memory his maternal grandparents are the torchbearers and ethical guides of his youth, brought to life in *La Maravilla* under fictional names: on one side, Manuel Castillo, a Yaqui railroad man and construction worker from Sonora, Mexico; on the other, his Spanish grandmother, Josephina Valenzuela de Castillo, a devout Catholic and part-time *curandera* who played the piano and loved jazz. The four years under their guardianship grounded Véa's view of the world and of himself as an American with a native history thousands of years older than the 1607 Jamestown settlement in Virginia, and as ancient as the Río Yaqui. At age ten his mother took him away from Buckeye Road to a life of seasonal farm labor in California. Véa's core biographical incidents, the mentoring roles played by both grandparents, the manifold cultures tightly bound in the everyday life at Buckeye Road, and his coming of age shortly before his mother took him away to California's farm labor, constitute the

thematic coordinates in *La Maravilla*.[1] And yet there is much more in Véa's premiere novel where autobiography is altered and transmuted into a work of art with an aim to create new paths and possibilities for a novel not bound by national, regional, or market-driven categories. Such is the fictional grid and basis of Véa's personal experience of temporality narrated as a voyage *in reverse* to an ancient Yaqui culture, and to his novels' affiliations to modern literature that I will closely examine in the pages that follow. First, however, a brief foray into Véa's early youth, his tour of duty in Vietnam, the one year of self-exile in France as an American war veteran, his studies at UC Berkeley, followed by his practice as a criminal defense attorney. We will then trace the literary traditions that inspired and ultimately brought forth the novelist instead of the physicist.

Shortly after moving to California's San Joaquín Valley, Véa found himself laboring in the fields next to Mexican, Filipino, Hindu, and French-Canadian farm workers. He attended Livermore High School where he studied French and was consistently ahead of his class, earning the highest grades in all courses. Looking back at the way he was brought up by his grandparents in the middle of the desert and with few material needs, Véa recalled that thanks to their emphasis on literacy, he "read every book listed by the University of California English 1A through 2B schedule." Facing a startled interviewer, Véa added: "I am convinced that if I had been born and raised in suburbia, I would have been a dolt" (*Red Wheelbarrow* 2003: 69). In the summer 1967 he was picking Brussels sprouts next to other *braceros* when he received a letter from the Army. He was being drafted into military service, and soon found himself in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive. "They didn't give me CO status [Conscientious Objector]," Véa told the late María Teresa Márquez, "but they stuck me in radio school and then I ended up being shot at anyway" (1995).

Véa served as an RTO [Radio Telephone Operator], working with portable communications in the demilitarized zone, carrying radios for an infantry unit and transmitting messages in code. "In order to survive," Véa told Boudreau, "You can kill an entire family, including the children; you are given the license, the uniform, and every weapon under the sun. You can get away with anything, and that's when you find out who you are. You realize that kindness and gentility are acts of will. You have to choose a side" (2). Véa returned home knowing that Vietnam had been a

[1] Biographical information on Alfredo Véa stems from an earlier essay on his life and work (Cantú 1999: 281-285), and from subsequent personal communications over a period of thirty years.

determining experience in his life. "I never again," Véa assured Márquez, "had any respect for tall white men with gray hair telling me everything was going to work just fine. It gave me a great belief, I think, in myself, because that was all that was left of me" (1995). Véa was discharged from the Army in 1969 with schrapnel lodged in his skull that he carries to this day. His youth as a farm laborer in California's San Joaquín Valley; his term as a soldier in the Vietnam War; and his days as a criminal defense attorney in San Francisco while battling with his own post-traumatic stress disorder, are the themes Véa develops in *The Silver Cloud Café* (1996), and *Gods Go Begging* (1999).

After his return from Vietnam, Véa's first destination was the Phoenix cemetery where he mourned at the graves of his grandparents, an episode that years later Véa would evoke in *La Maravilla* (Chapter 15). He then rode his motorcycle to the heartland of the eight Yaqui pueblos in Sonora, exploring, communing, and listening to people's tales in Potam (Yaqui for modern-day Cócorit), at last reconnecting with his interred Yaqui ancestors and his grandfather's cultural heritage. After his return to California, Véa moved to France where he lived in Paris for one year in an Armenian hotel located in the Latin Quarter. To pay for his room and board, Véa worked as a janitor at this hotel where, with mop in hand, he would muse over memories of his French-Canadian *bracero* friends and his high school courses in French, aware of the ironies in his life: he was now in France, an imperial power that had been routed and sent home packing in 1954 by the Vietnamese. He felt certain that a similar fate awaited the United States. Thinking of life back home, Véa would admit to himself that his chores as a custodian were nothing compared to the back-breaking jobs of his youth in California's agricultural fields. By mid-day he would finish his cleaning tasks at the hotel, having the rest of the day to himself. In personal conversations he would recall afternoons and countless hours spent at the Louvre, ascending the grand staircase, step by step, with the opulent marble sculpture of the Winged Victory of Samothrace in full view, followed by hours spent observing and studying Mediterranean antiquities—Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek, Roman—and paintings by world masters. His most important discoveries while in Paris were writers who were creating the New Latin American poetry and the novel, such as Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, Alejo Carpentier and, behind them, the father of them all: the war veteran and novelist Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), the author of *Don Quixote.*[2]

[2] The novel *La región más transparente* (1958), by Carlos Fuentes, was translated into English as *Where the Air is Clear* by Sam Hileman (New York: Noonday, 1960), and in French as *La plus limpide région*, translated by Robert Marrast

Fig. 1. The Winged Victory of Samothrace (*circa* 295-290 BC)
The Louvre Museum, Paris, France

He had never read anything comparable to the work of these writers, and yet their world and the culture they wrote about were genealogically threaded and grafted onto Véa's Yaqui Mexican inheritance. In other words, the idea of his American birthright broadened into a consciousness of his complex genealogy, and of its configuration, thus invalidating the notion of an original ethnic lineage that continues to determine one's historically layered alleged true identity, which would lead to the yearning for a return to "origins" and thus to one's mythical homeland. Quite the contrary—Véa realized—such consciousness should reveal one's heterogeneous ancestries and all the historical discontinuities that continue to navigate and pass through us.[3] Years later, interviewed as a "Chicano"

(Paris: Gallimard, 1964). Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963) appeared in English as *Hopscotch,* translated by Gregory Rabassa (New York: Random House, 1966); and in French as *Marelle*, translated by Laure Bataillon and Françoise Rosset (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). There are several translations of *Don Quixote* into English and French, therefore Véa's determination to learn how to speak and read French fluently would point to French editions, with English versions within reach to clarify passages deemed unclear or inaccessible to interpretation. For information on Alejo Carpentier's novels and translations, see below.

[3] The concept of genealogy in historical analysis has been paraphrased from a passage in Michel Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1984: 95), where he defines "genealogy" as a critique of teleological or linear historiography

writer, therefore with a group and thus a commonly shared "ethnic" identity, Véa was asked to describe his cultural background. Conscious that the word "cultural" was meant as a polite word for "minority" or "racial," Véa responded with an unforeseen and opaquely sarcastic answer meant to extend and diversify the narrow understanding of peoples' cultural background in the United States: "I'm Mexican, Yaqui, and Filipino. But lineage isn't the totality of anybody's cultural background. I grew up the first years of my life with Indians on the reservation, and black people from the dust bowl, and a lot of Irish and Oakies. So, I think those are my cultural background, too" (Sullivan Porter 81). [4] His words have been taken literally, and as a result the irony has been lost; Véa is frequently described as being Mexican, Spanish, Yaqui, Filipino, and Hindu. The Oakie and Irish backgrounds are left out.

Véa returned to the United States in 1971 speaking fluent French and with his mind made up to enroll at the University of California, Berkeley, where he pursued a dual degree in English and Physics (1971-1975). Of his professors, he remembers one in particular: Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004), Polish poet and essayist, and recipient of the 1980 Nobel Prize in literature. In his book *The Captive Mind* (1953), Milosz wrote of his experiences in Poland under Nazi occupation and, after the war, under Soviet rule, considering both to be oppressive and dehumanizing. Of the English courses at UC Berkeley, Véa recalls the ones in poetry, the novel, and the essay—specifically his readings of James Baldwin, Theodore Roethke, and Dylan Thomas—as being crucial in the cultivation of his love of literature. Another important fact to consider is the release of the paperback edition of *Pocho* in 1970, followed by the publication of Rudolfo Anaya's award-winning novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) by Quinto Sol Publications, spearheaded by faculty at UC Berkeley. In such circumstances, Véa found himself at the center of what was then thought to be a "Chicano Renaissance," a phrase conceived by Felipe D. Ortego (1971: 295-307). In personal conversations, Rudolfo Anaya would reminisce about his first visit to UC Berkeley to accept the Quinto Sol

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that rests on the belief that desires, ideas, words and meanings hold and preserve their inner logic, thus ignoring the extent to which struggles, wars, invasions, and wanton plundering have structured a nation's non-linear history. Understood as such, genealogy traces the *recurrence* of events in their similarity, but engaged in different roles, or in moments such historical possibilities *remained unrealized*. To read Foucault's essay in its entirety, see Foucault (1984: 76-100).

[4] Véa's idea of "cultural background" runs counter to Chicano discourse in its generational conception of an undifferentiated and thus homogeneous self-identity, at times brokered in terms of class, ethnicity, or gender.

award, and his joy in speaking to an overflowing university audience. At this time, Alfredo Véa was at UC Berkeley and amid a creative wave of a new (Chicano) literature emerging from this campus and meant to give expression to Véa's own cultural background and experiences. Besides his one year of self-exile in France, Véa's years of study at Berkeley could be considered the second phase in his eventual birth as a novelist.[5] After earning a B.A. in English and Physics in 1975, Véa entered Law School at UC Berkeley, where he took his law degree in 1978. Unlike most of his Chicano classmates who proclaimed a commitment to the social cause and struggle, and intent to serve as community activists—but later submitted letters of application to work for corporations—Véa took a different path.[6] Caught in his memories as a farm worker and war veteran, Véa volunteered to serve without pay on behalf of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers, including duties at the *Centro Legal de la Raza*. In 1980, Véa transferred to the San Francisco Public Defender's Office where he worked until 1986. He has been in private practice since then, specializing mostly in homicide and death penalty cases.

In one of our telephone conversations in late 1995, Véa and I discussed a tape he had sent me of an interview held with María Teresa Márquez (University of New Mexico). In this interview, he referred to an

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[5] The Winter 1971 issue of *El Grito* (Vol. IV, Number 2) announced the first annual literary award presented "for the first time in the history of the Mexican American in the United States," awarded to Tomás Rivera (4). In the interview Rivera lauded *El Grito* because it represents, in his judgment, "la inteligencia *independiente* chicana" (5). The 1970 and1971 issues of *El Grito*, include two book reviews, notifications of the national Quinto Sol Awards (Rivera, Anaya), and the emergent literature published during the early years of the Chicano movement, creating the promised foundation *for independent* scholarly work in Mexican American and Chicano studies, viewed as synonymous in Rivera's quoted passage.

[6] Quinto Sol Publications was founded by UC Berkeley Professor Octavio I. Romano-V. (1923-2005), assisted by a board of contributing editors that included faculty and graduate students from UC Berkeley and San Diego State University. In addition to the annual Premio Quinto Sol, QSP also published the journal titled *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican American Thought* (1967-1974). It is of interest to note that the Summer 1970 issue of *El Grito* includes a book review by Nick C. Vaca (at the time a doctoral student in sociology at UC Berkeley) of Frank Bonham's novel *Viva Chicano* (1970), and a book review by Mario T. García of Manuel P. Servín's edited book *The Mexican Americans: An Awakening Minority* (1970). Read again after more than fifty years, and with the benefit of a retrospective view, it is evident that these two reviews are intimately related to a new and developing critical attitude inspired by a nationally unfolding field known at the time as Mexican American Studies.