

José Antonio Villarreal  
and *Pocho*



# José Antonio Villarreal and *Pocho*:

## *A Mexican American Novel and Its Tragic Plot*

By

Roberto Cantú

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



José Antonio Villarreal and *Pocho*:  
A Mexican American Novel and Its Tragic Plot

By Roberto Cantú

This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2022 by Roberto Cantú

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-8876-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8876-9

FOR

Barbara,  
Kelly, Ian, and Caleb



# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
CHAPTER ONE .....	13
<i>Pocho</i> : Its Making and Its Critical Reception	
CHAPTER TWO .....	29
<i>Pocho</i> and Its Narrative Arts	
CHAPTER THREE .....	39
Myth and Cult in <i>Pocho</i>	
CHAPTER FOUR .....	49
<i>Pocho</i> 's Narrative Structure	
CHAPTER FIVE.....	67
The Heightened Perception of the Real	
CHAPTER SIX.....	95
A Mexican American Family Tragedy	
Works Cited.....	127





## INTRODUCTION

*The criticism we have had up until now  
has prohibited the development of form, of  
structure, and of style we can call our own.  
We are traditional to the extreme.*

—José Antonio Villarreal (1979: 166).

Returning from four years of active service in the Second World War, a young Mexican American was coming home with a head injury but with big plans for his future. He had been raised in a central California household by a father who had fought in the Mexican Revolution, had brought his family to the United States, and ever since had been laboring in Santa Clara's agricultural fields while musing about his long-gone glorious days as a *jinete* (horseman) in Francisco Villa's "Golden" cavalry. Determined to guard against his father's fate, the young war veteran was firm and uncompromising: he would enroll in a university, get an education, and write novels for the rest of his life. That young man was José Antonio Villarreal, and *Pocho* his inaugural novel, the first fruit of his labors with nine summers in the making.

Years before, Villarreal had sensed that he would write without the benefit of extant Mexican American literary models, and with no assurances of a far-reaching readership. Although the work of California Mexicans and Mexican Americans was available in archives, or had been previously published, such publications had been out of print for many years. In hindsight, had he read the work of former Mexican American novelists, he would have had to break with them given that Villarreal's world as a war veteran was different, therefore with other thematic and formal concerns pressing on him.<sup>1</sup> Facing the blank page, but filled with memories of his youth as a bookworm, and of his work as a teenager in

---

<sup>1</sup> Mexican American literary history before Villarreal's generation included memoirs and novels; the former, by Antonio María Osio (Baja California, 1800-1878); the latter, by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton (Baja California, 1832-1895). There had been recent memoirs and autobiographies by Jovita González (Texas, 1904-1983); Cleofas Jaramillo (New Mexico, 1878-1956); Fabiola Cabeza de Baca (New Mexico, 1894-1991); and the religious tales by Fray Angélico Chávez (New Mexico, 1910-1996).

California's agricultural fields, Villarreal had confidence in his imagination, intuition, and the force of recollection needed to recreate in a novel the story of his growing up in Santa Clara. His ambition, however, would later surpass the mere storytelling craft, learning from twentieth century art movements the techniques and experiments in narrative form and structure that had brought forth modern paintings and novels in Mexico, as well as in other parts of the world, including the United States. When published in 1959, there was nothing like *Pocho* in previous Mexican American novels, and—aside from Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972)—hardly anything in Chicano literature to equal *Pocho* in anecdote, structure, and style until the mid-1980s.<sup>2</sup>

I first read *Pocho* in late fall 1971 in a paperback edition released by Doubleday a year before. I had been in search of a Mexican American novel with the intent to require it as a reading assignment in a mentoring project conducted at the California Institution for Women (CIW) in the City of Corona. This project was planned with four other fellow UCLA graduate students, agreeing to meet every Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Upon arrival, we would break into small groups, with Tony Salazar, a UCLA law student, instructing his group of inmates on the subject of law, the U.S. constitution, and citizen's rights; other mentors were in charge of areas in psychology and sociology. My teaching subject was Mexican American literature with only Villarreal's novel and xeroxed poetry as the core of my curriculum. By mid-1972 I had added as a required reading Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), another novel that would keep me occupied for many years.

CIW's female inmates immediately related to Villarreal's characters—Juan Rubio, Consuelo, Richard, Luz—who reminded them of their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, husbands or boyfriends; others were emotionally gripped by Villarreal's accounts of Mexican fiestas, funerals, and mutual aid during the Depression; there was also the expressed pride in knowing that *Pocho* had been written by a Mexican American, in itself a reading experience they had never had before. Lastly, most of the CIW mentees recognized in Richard Rubio a brother or an older cousin who at the time had served or was serving in a distant war. This personal connection to *Pocho* would often repeat itself among my students in undergraduate courses at Cal State LA. We operated as a

---

<sup>2</sup> New directions as of the mid-eighties in Chicana and Chicano literature include *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), by Ana Castillo, *Voice-Haunted Journey* (1990), by Eliud Martínez, *First Confession* (1991), by Montserrat Fontes, and the remarkable breakthrough novel *La Maravilla* (1993), by Alfredo Véa.

mentoring team for the entire year 1972, with Tony driving us each Saturday to Corona and back to UCLA. In the winter 1973 the CIW program closed, and I began to concentrate on the much-awaited PhD comprehensive examinations.

At this point my plans for a dissertation topic and a life of teaching took an unexpected turn. In the spring 1974 I received a letter from a dean in Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge confirming an offer of a tenure-track appointment in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, effective in Fall 1974. In 1972 I had published an article on Mexican poet and essayist Alfonso Reyes, read favorably by a department chair at LSU, who contacted me in late 1973 with an invitation to join his department faculty.<sup>3</sup> While mentoring at CIW, however, I had changed course in my choice of a doctoral dissertation topic, no longer on the poetry and literary essays of Alfonso Reyes but on Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman. I convinced my dissertation chair, Dr. Aníbal Sánchez-Reulet, an Argentinean philosopher, to approve my eleventh-hour change of plans and academic direction; he agreed, and soon after I received the consent of my committee, in which Professor Robert N. Burr (History, UCLA) served as a member. I was drawn to O’Gorman’s idea of the “invention” of America (the “New World,” not the US); to his studies of Aztec sculpture as cult objects, but also as art; to his publications on Colonial Mexican historiography; nineteenth century Mexico; and philosophical history, with thinkers such as José Ortega y Gasset and Martin Heidegger as major figures in O’Gorman’s publications. No less alluring and engaging to a graduate student were O’Gorman’s disposition, talent, and masterful skills in polemics with leading historians from France (Marcel Bataillon), Mexico (Silvio Zavala), and the United States (Lewis Hanke), to name a few.

Years before “deconstruction” jolted the field of theory and criticism, O’Gorman was questioning and “destructing” (Heidegger’s *Abbau*) the idea of America and of its alleged “discovery.” In a memorable polemic with Marcel Bataillon, who believed that the discovery of America was unequivocal, thus indisputable, O’Gorman dissented, arguing

---

<sup>3</sup> In 1972 my essay on Alfonso Reyes was published in *Mester*, a literary journal I was editing at UCLA’s Department of Spanish and Portuguese (1972-1975). It was titled “El simbolismo de la Caída en *Ancorajes*,” *Mester*, Vol. III, No. 1 (abril de 1972): 35-41. I did not forget Alfonso Reyes. Forty five years later, in the Spring 2017, I organized and hosted at Cal State LA an international conference on Alfonso Reyes’ poetry, essays, and translations of world and classical writers. Two years later I edited a book: *A Scholiast’s Quill: New Critical Essays on Alfonso Reyes* (UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2019).

that when Americanists take the pen, their assumptions about what “America” is or was, derive from a *received* tradition that is presumed to be self-evident, based on questions and answers lifted from past disciplinary positions, hence not according to the ontological question of what is the *Being* of that entity called America. O’Gorman’s “destruction” method—derived from his interdisciplinary background as a lawyer, historian, and years-long study of Martin Heidegger with Spanish philosopher José Gaos—would turn the emphasis of the argument upside down, relocating it to a different critical language and method of inquiry.

O’Gorman claimed that America’s ontological question of Being has been forgotten or buried under a tradition that obscures more than it reveals, therefore the need of a “confrontation” with the historical sciences, and of a rebellious attitude that would take us back to the original, fundamental question of what America *is*: not a *discovered geographical entity*, but an *invented human world* that has yet to be ontologically understood: namely, the New World as Europe’s utopia (Greek for “no-place,” meaning a space waiting for its designation and fulfillment), in itself a mandate to transcend the Old World, not as a *place of conquests*; instead, a new place—America—where Europe, as the “old world,” would overcome itself and experience a true “Renaissance,” beyond the art and splendor enjoyed by the aristocratic few.<sup>4</sup> Setting aside his mace and lance, O’Gorman would remind Bataillon that Christopher Columbus died thinking he had landed in Asia, and would have been very upset had he known that he had bumped into a very large body of land, later to be named after Columbus’s hated Florentine rival: Amerigo

---

<sup>4</sup> Edmundo O’Gorman was the elected keynote speaker at the XXI Reunion of the Pacific Coast Council of Latin American Studies, Fresno, California, 24 October 1975. A year before I had contacted O’Gorman informing him of my dissertation plans. He wrote to me in early October 1975 asking if I would agree to accompany him to Fresno, thus giving us a couple of days to talk about my dissertation and questions I might have on his work. We met at the LAX airport, drove to Fresno, and I had the opportunity to witness O’Gorman’s oratorical gifts in fluent English during his keynote presentation. Subsequently I published O’Gorman’s lecture, titled “Thoughts on the Historian’s Task and Responsibility” in *Escolios: Revista de Literatura*, a literary journal I had founded and edited at Cal State LA (see Volume II, Numbers 1-2 [mayo-noviembre 1977]: 1-10). For a broader discussion of O’Gorman’s philosophy of history, including his celebrated polemics with international Americanists, and with specialists on the Columbian enterprise, consult my dissertation *La invención de América: historia y filosofía de la historia en la obra de Edmundo O’Gorman* (UCLA, 1982). For my study of O’Gorman’s polemics, see Chapter IV, section 1, titled “Historia de la idea del descubrimiento de América y crítica de la historiografía americanista,” 1982: 284-335).

Vespucci. It was clear to me that O’Gorman’s polemical engagements were his way of asking a colleague to join him in a critique of foundations, and to historicize the topic under discussion.

With O’Gorman and my revised dissertation plans in mind, I reread the letter from LSU and politely declined the offer of a tenure-track position. I was heading in a different academic direction, no longer specializing in poetry and the essay. Shortly after, I lectured at Cal State LA on Rudolfo Anaya’s novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, and was impressed with the students in the Department of Chicano Studies, who reminded me of my literary-insightful mentees at CIW, and of their impassioned and devout desire to learn more about their history and culture as Mexican Americans. To my surprise, a week or so later I received an invitation to join the Chicano Studies faculty in the Fall 1974 as a part-time instructor. I now think that the curve—not the straight line I had first planned and anticipated in my academic life—was drawn in 1971, after reading *Pocho* in preparation for a mentoring project at CIW.

It was in 1973 that I first met José Antonio Villarreal in Los Angeles, shortly after his return from Mexico City. I had previously sent him a letter informing him that I was a graduate student at UCLA, that I had read *Pocho* with interest, and was hoping to obtain his permission to translate *Pocho* from English to Spanish. Villarreal’s response—written with a fountain pen, and in a graceful and ornate script that reminded me of my grandfather’s old-fashioned, sinuous but precise handwriting—was prompt and unambiguous. He informed me that if he needed a Spanish translation of his novel that he would do it himself. A few months later a brief note arrived in the mail suggesting I meet him at his sister’s house in Los Angeles. It was in our first meeting that I saw Richard Rubio in the adult Villarreal: contemplative, ironically observant, and a chain-smoker. I also noticed that on a nearby table stood a bottle of tequila. Before my arrival, Villarreal had enjoyed half of its contents, perhaps in preparation for our meeting. In a semi-humorous tone, he pointed with a smoldering cigarette to the memory of several boxes with copies of the hardcover edition of *Pocho* (1959) he had stored in his garage for many years. Doubleday had paid him in part with unsold copies of his novel. After giving away free copies to neighbors and to his extended family, one day he ordered the remaining boxes to be removed and thrown away.

We did not talk about the translation, but I got the point. It was evident he didn’t think there would be any interest among our fellow Mexicans in reading *Pocho*, nor in any other part of the Spanish-speaking world; after all, hardly anyone had noticed, much less read *Pocho* in the United States. Concerning Chicano literary critics: they are too ideological,

he claimed, therefore pledged and bound to a “group think” which by its very nature excludes the writer’s personal freedom and the right to imagine beyond the traditional and customary, essential to any form of art. Besides, his mind was on other, more important prospects: he was waiting for the release of his second novel, *The Fifth Horseman* (1974), where he recounted the life background of Heraclio Inés (known as Juan Rubio in *Pocho*), and the national conditions that had led to the 1910 Mexican Revolution. He assured me that this was his best novel thus far. We drank another shot of tequila and continued with our conversation. Two years later Villarreal and I participated in the first seminar on Chicano literature at a conference sponsored by the Modern Language Association (MLA).<sup>5</sup> As for the translation, I would have to wait until the summer of 1993—thus, twenty years later—for a contract to translate *Pocho* from English to Spanish, coordinated by Villarreal himself with Doubleday. In the meantime, things were turning hazy around me—the frequent shots of tequila, the clouds of cigarette smoke—so I rushed a few questions.

Villarreal said that he made the decision to be a novelist years before graduating from UC Berkeley. His plan was to write a cycle of four novels—he referred to the cycle as a tetralogy—that would integrate a vast social landscape rendering the branching out and dispersal of a Mexican American family through three generations. The narrative cycle would bring to light various modes of acculturation to urban life in the United States. As I would soon learn in subsequent conversations, Villarreal’s mention of a tetralogy stemmed from his readings of Greek drama and its usual composition into three tragedies and one satyr play staged during the festival of Dionysus, the god of wine and the grape known among the Romans as Bacchus. In other words, *Pocho* was the first phase of a narrative project intended to embody different aspects of a modern Mexican American tragedy, closing with a satyr play in a rustic setting

---

<sup>5</sup> The seminar, proposed and organized by Francisco Jiménez (Santa Clara University), was listed in the MLA conference as “Critical Approaches to Chicano Literature,” and held in San Francisco, California on December 29, 1975. Villarreal’s response to Chicano literary critics carried the following title: “Chicano Literature: Art and Politics from the Perspective of the Artist.” I read a paper on novelist Rudolfo Anaya. Other participants in this seminar included novelists Tomás Rivera and Rolando Hinojosa. The presentations were later published in different literary journals, and reprinted jointly in 1979. For more details, consult Jiménez (1979: ix-xi).

with harvests, wine drinking, festive dances, and sexual raillery.<sup>6</sup> On that first evening our friendship began and a year later I joined the Department of Chicano Studies faculty, to Villarreal's confusion and displeasure. Chicano literary critics had attacked *Pocho* without having read it, so why, Villarreal asked, would I want to be in their company? He soon forgave me and agreed to lecture at Cal State LA on the occasion of his recently-published novel, *The Fifth Horseman*. After his campus presentation—well attended and with a Q&A session that pleased Villarreal—we had dinner in a downtown restaurant; later that evening, in a nearby photo shop, we were photographed as Mexican revolutionaries. Villarreal had a hearty laugh after the photo was taken: he pointed to the table and asked me if I had noticed three errors: there was a bottle with a Jim Beam label of straight bourbon (not tequila) and it was empty. When I asked about the third error, he looked at my costume, and said we looked more like musicians in a Mexican mariachi than revolutionaries.

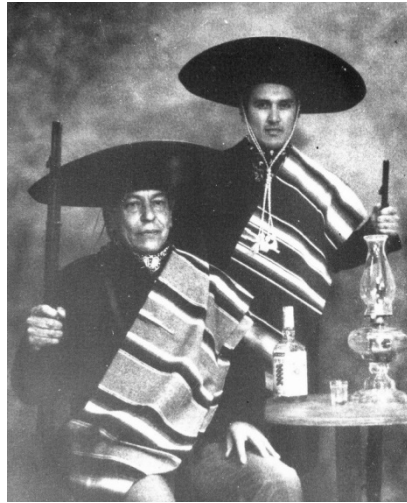


Fig. 1. With José Antonio Villarreal dressed as Mexican revolutionaries. Photo taken in a Los Angeles costume photo studio (Fall 1975).

---

<sup>6</sup> Commenting on Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Charles Segal observes that Dionysus' satyr-like profile and his "ambiguous sexuality, unheroic demeanor, and fondness for wine, women, and song are sources of fun and laughter" (2001: 8).

In the 1990s Villarreal taught courses at the College of the Siskiyous in Northern California. In one of our communications, he informed me that the college faculty had expressed interest in learning more about Chicano literature. He hoped I would give a lecture on any topic I chose. Instead of a lecture, we held a two-day conference on Chicano literature with participating novelists Helena María Viramontes and Eliud Martínez; also present was Los Angeles poet Marisela Norte, and a small group of my students (Richard Romero, English; Juan Muñoz, Chicano Studies; and Cristóbal Palma, Chicano Studies). Eliud had recently published a novel, *Voice-Haunted Journey* (1990), and had read all of Villarreal's novels. He shared other interests with Villarreal: Eliud's paternal grandfather had fought in the Mexican Revolution, but on the side of Venustiano Carranza—the enemy of Francisco Villa. My three students had read Villarreal's novels in my English and Chicano Studies courses, and had brought their copies for Villarreal to sign. Viramontes, who at the time was waiting for the publication of her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), could only stay one day, but wanted to meet with Villarreal at this event. We were lodged at the campus dormitories where we hardly slept during the two days of our visit, with Villarreal holding late conversations with us. A few weeks later, Villarreal called to share the good news: Doubleday had agreed to a Spanish translation of *Pocho*—would I be willing to translate it?, he asked. The translation was published the following year, and it was presented at the border city of Tijuana in *El Día* bookstore on July 30, 1994. It was Villarreal's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

After the release of the Spanish translation, Villarreal looked at me and said he had waited thirty five years to finally “hear” his Mexican characters speaking in Spanish, their native language. I reminded him that I had waited twenty one years to translate *Pocho*. He looked at me and smiled. Weeks after the book presentation in Tijuana, we met in Los Angeles and he referred briefly to the distribution in Mexico and Latin America of my translation, and the possible reviews by Mexican and Latin American literary critics (Villarreal's irony was evident in his eyes). He advised me not to hold my breath while I waited. A review of my translation was later forwarded to me in which a Chicana literary critic blasted me for not allowing Villarreal's characters to speak in *pachuco* slang. I shared the review with Villarreal and we imagined Juan Rubio dressing and talking in the *pachuco* idiom of Edward James Olmos in *Zoot Suit*. We found such a critique to be hilarious.

Years later, sensing that twilight was approaching, Villarreal turned his attention to correspondence with friends, and to his favorite pastimes: the joys of reading, and the recall of memories of things past that



he would never write about. José Antonio Villarreal died on January 13, 2010, with Mount Shasta rising from his bedroom window, and with his wife Barbara, daughter Kelly, and two sons Ian and Caleb at his side.<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 2. With Villarreal, during the presentation of the Spanish translation of *Pocho* in Tijuana, México, at the bookstore *El Día*, 30 July 1994.

Shortly after Villarreal's death, I was asked by Professor Graciela Silva Rodríguez to contribute an essay to be included in a volume on the theme of Mexico-US border literatures. With Villarreal in mind, I accepted and met my deadline with an essay titled "Literary Tradition and Narrative Singularity in José Antonio Villarreal's Novel *Pocho*" (Cantú 2012). A year ago I reread my article and thought of revising and updating the essay so as to include two other novels by Villarreal, *The Fifth Horseman* (1974), and *Clemente Chacón* (1984). With such plan in mind, I contacted

---

<sup>7</sup> Telephone communications with Barbara Villarreal (wife), and Ian Villarreal (son), 3 July 2021. For more extensive details, consult the José Antonio Villarreal Papers (MSS.1974.11.01), at the Archives & Special Collections, Santa Clara University Library: [https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8h41vr4/entire\\_text/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8h41vr4/entire_text/)

Professor Silva Rodríguez and asked for permission to reprint my 2012 essay in a revised version, to which she promptly and kindly sent the required permission. To prepare for the project, I followed the trail of Villarreal's steps as he wrote *Pocho*, reading what he might have read, rereading the reviews and articles on Villarreal's three novels; and, after many years, reading once again Villarreal's letters that I had received over the years before his death, letters in which he recalled his youth and ambitions as a writer (I quote from a selection of such letters in footnotes).

After this initial preparatory phase, I came to the realization that a worthier and more challenging plan of work would be to return, after so many years, to Villarreal's original theme of a Mexican American family tragedy, thematically distant from my 2012 essay. It would be a longer work than initially planned, so I chose to limit my attention to *Pocho* only. After all, Villarreal's other two novels did not quite fit in his long-planned tragedy project: for instance, *The Fifth Horseman* was (I thought) a tribute to his father in a semi-biographical novel where Heraclio Inés is both Juan Rubio (fictional character) and José Heladio (Villarreal's father), therefore: Heraclio=Heladio. Moreover, *Clemente Chacón* was Villarreal's response to Chicano critics and a satire of the American Dream. Furthermore, I noted that when Villarreal described his project for a tetralogy with a tragic theme, he referred to it in the past tense, perhaps hoping to resurrect it in the projected sequel to *Pocho*, "The Center Ring." As such, it seemed to me that, based on questions I had not sifted through completely, the tragic plot would have to rest on *Pocho* alone.

My project would begin with a brief biographical sketch of Villarreal, framed within his time and his era; turning next to *Pocho*'s reception and literary criticism (for and against *Pocho*, often against Villarreal), thus examining an early phase in Chicano literary history, assessing and "deconstructing," so to speak, the distortions and misconstructions of Villarreal's first novel. The third phase would be to analyze *Pocho* according to its narrative arts and narrative structure from cross-disciplinary perspectives, therefore not according to the conventional, narrow, and institutionalized Chicano critical approaches limited to race, class, or gender. The fourth and final phase of my work would be to analyze *Pocho* in its narrative totality—as a total work of art—and, in accordance with Villarreal's proposed theme of a Mexican American family tragedy. When completed, the manuscript was much longer than the article I had initially conceived or thought I would write. I sent the final draft and book proposal to Cambridge Scholars for review. I then drank two shots of tequila, in Villarreal's memory.



Fig. 3. First row, left to right: Richard Romero (graduate student, Cal State LA); Marisela Norte (Chicana poet); Juan Muñoz (graduate student, Cal State LA) and Cristóbal Palma (graduate student, Cal State LA).  
Second row: myself, next to Eliud Martínez and José Antonio Villarreal.  
Background: Mount Shasta, May 14, 1993.

I thank Professor Graciela Silva Rodríguez for her collegial spirit and previous publication of an earlier article on *Pocho* that has fully grown into its present incarnation. Many thanks as well to Adam Rummens, my liaison and Commissioning Editor at Cambridge Scholars; to Amanda Millar (Typesetting Manager); to Sophie Edminson (Cover Designer); and to Sean Howley (Book Reviews Editor) for their professional support and assistance in this and other previous book projects. Close to home, my abiding gratitude to my wife Elvira and to our three teenage children--Victoria Guadalupe, Isabel, and Roberto--for their continued love and bighearted encouragement while I worked in my favorite corner at home, remembering and thinking of Villarreal and his work.



# ONE

## *POCHO:* ITS MAKING AND ITS CRITICAL RECEPTION

*In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings,  
not as individuals, but as the one living being,  
with whose creative joy we are united.*

—Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967: 105).

Born in Los Angeles on 30 July 1924 of Mexican parents, José Antonio Villarreal grew up near the farms and orchards of Santa Clara, California. Shortly after graduating from high school in 1941, Villarreal enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served four years of active service in the Pacific during the Second World War. To keep fit, he joined the boxing competitions sponsored to lift morale and to encourage physical fitness among Navy sailors. Realizing that he had the aplomb and natural aptitude to knock out his opponents, the eighteen-year old Villarreal considered boxing as a career; instead, he enrolled at UC Berkeley in 1947 with one aim in mind: to be a novelist. In 1950 he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and, three years later, having finished a draft of a novel bearing the title “Our Little Life,” Villarreal hitched his way to New York City with the manuscript in his suitcase, certain that Doubleday would publish it.<sup>1</sup> Fate, which as a rule refuses to draw straight lines in people’s lives, opened other unexpected alternatives: while in New York, Villarreal met Barbara Gentles with whom he fell in love and married.

He returned to Santa Clara with his young bride and, not hearing from Doubleday, continued working on his novel, immersed in a life of

---

<sup>1</sup> The original title “Our Little Life” had as its source Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (“we are such stuff/ as dreams are made on, and *our little life/* is rounded with a sleep,” Act IV, scene 1, lines 156-158, my emphasis). Apparently while Villarreal was rewriting “Our Little Life,” he chose at one point a different title on which to build *Pocho*’s tragic plot. In other words, years after returning to Santa Clara from his trip to New York, Villarreal decided to modify his novel’s conceptual structure, thus away from the romance in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. I will return to this question below.

vigorous creativity, and with the power of recall and imagination at their prime. Five years later his novel was accepted and released, but with a different title: *Pocho* (1959).



Fig. 4. Barbara Gentles de Villarreal and José Antonio Villarreal  
on their wedding day, 14 May 1953.  
Photo courtesy of Caleb Villarreal.

A troublesome title and an emboldened authorial choice: *pocho* is an insult hurled by Mexican nationalists at “Americanized” Mexicans, a word synonymous with “traitor”; in contrast, highbrow and affluent Mexicans view *pochos* as *descastados*—declassed and thus low-status. On this side of the Mexico-U.S. border, white Americans consider Mexican Americans to be an ethnic group, mostly bereft of intelligence and thus predestined to do manual labor. The structural irony behind this choice of title has yet to be studied in relation to Villarreal’s will to overcome—intelligently, with attention to art and craft—conventional portrayals of Mexicans and *pochos*, designations associated with recurring experiences of social vilification and dramatized by Richard Rubio, the novel’s protagonist and representative of a Mexican American family tragedy. Aware of such trans-border attitudes toward Mexican Americans, and knowing as a novelist that language and art have a transformative power in the reshaping of our innermost self, Villarreal dared to challenge and overturn

the various stereotypical meanings of the word *pocho* by way of Richard's actions and capacity for thought as a Mexican American who claims, during the novel's critical moments, that real intellectual and cultural life are possibilities only when we rise above our habitual and socially-constructed sense of reality. This attitude is a determining force behind Richard's exceptional epiphanic moments in *Pocho*'s tragic plot.

Thus began Villarreal's life in a complex web of roles, from a Mexican American youth in California's agricultural fields, and a wounded world war veteran, to university graduate, novelist and a married man. To support his growing family, Villarreal held several jobs: first as a bus driver, then as writer of speeches and, among other sources of income, in an insurance company. After *Pocho*'s publication, Villarreal was hired as a writer in residence in colleges and universities, among them the University of Colorado, the University of Texas at El Paso, and the University of Santa Clara.

In the early 1970s two events altered the course of his life: first, the publication of *Pocho*'s paperback edition (Doubleday, 1970), followed by negative reviews from several Chicano literary critics; second, he became a Mexican citizen, migrating back to the town of Cañitas de Felipe Pescador in northern Zacatecas, the land of his ancestors. Villarreal's southern migration was motivated by his wish to visit his father, José Heladio Villarreal (1882-1984), who had served in Francisco Villa's *Ejército del Norte*, and had galloped next to the famed revolutionary in major battles, including the legendary raid in Columbus, New Mexico (9 March 1916). After living and working for more than four decades in California's agricultural fields, don José Heladio returned to Cañitas de Felipe Pescador where he lived the remaining years of his long life horse-riding and tending to his ranch. During conversations with his father, Villarreal traveled back in time through paternal memories of the Mexican Revolution, and soon after took the road to Mexico's capital for further research on Mexican history, literature, and the visual arts, among them Mexican muralism.

In the fall of 1972 Villarreal was back in Santa Clara, where he completed his second novel, *The Fifth Horseman*. Villarreal's choice to treat the theme of the Mexican Revolution, instead of continuing with his tetralogy project to integrate a Mexican American family through three generations, may have been a tribute to his father in the form of a biographical novel. After the publication of his second novel, Villarreal planned on writing a sequel to *Pocho*, telling of Richard Rubio's return from the Pacific after the Second World War, thus continuing with the autobiographical cast in *Pocho*'s storyline.

*Pocho*'s sequel was to be titled "The Houyhnhnms," after Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), a satirical novel in four parts with voyages to remote regions of the world. Years later, still as a work in progress, the novel's title changed to "The Center Ring."<sup>2</sup> In 1984 Villarreal published *Clemente Chacón*, a novel whose eponymous hero represents Mexicans migrating to urban areas across the border; the growing importance of money in people's lives; and the ethical vacuum created in the wake of the acculturation to life in the United States. The return to nineteenth century realism in *Clemente Chacón*, emphasizing verisimilitude and the story itself and not its innovations in narrative structure appears to have been Villarreal's decision to forsake his long-held idea of a tetralogy in a tragic mode, turning instead to novels easier to read in order to reach more readers on matters related to international border themes, and to the material seductions of modern American life.<sup>3</sup> *Clemente Chacón*'s linear narrative of assumed identities, border poverty and various forms of prostitution, adultery, and common greed—themes with their own pathos and melodrama—led to the portrait of the eponymous hero as someone who receives promotions while climbing the ladder to personal success, the aim of the quintessential American hero

---

<sup>2</sup> This layered and therefore ambiguous figuration of life as being in *the center ring*, thus as a mere spectacle in a circus or boxing ring, is found in multiple references in *Pocho*, some to Richard Rubio's early readings (James Otis' *Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks With the Circus*, 40, 138); to the "one-ring Mexican circus Richard once saw in Milpitas" (49); to the Depression-era political agitators from the city who would climb to the central platform in a barn to exhort local Mexican, Portuguese, and Spanish farm workers (49); to Richard's first experience as a boxer ("and stood transfixed in the center of the ring," 103-104); and, finally, to Richard's fear of dying, favoring the death in a circus of "the man on the flying trapeze" (180). This last reference is an example of Villarreal's ring composition, a device in which words or situations recur in the form of cycles, marking *Pocho*'s historical background in the way of references to revolutions, migrations, the Depression, films, cars, and to other incidents and commodities that signal the historical and material culture during the years drawn into the novel (1920-1942). The allusion to "The Man on the Flying Trapeze (1867), a song composed by George Laybourne (United Kingdom, 1842-1884), refers to the famous trapeze artist Leotard who would perform with no need of the safety net (therefore Richard's admiration of fearlessness and courage); on the other hand, Leybourne's legendary figure rests on his handsome good looks, love of liquor, his lavish hedonism, and on having died relatively young and bankrupt. Richard's reference to the "Man on the Flying Trapeze" thus corresponds to a moment of dark humor: "it would be not only welcome but a privilege to be dead that way" (180).

<sup>3</sup> For early polemical engagements with fellow Chicano literary critics, see Cantú 1990: 13-63; reprinted in Cantú 2014: 51-69.



and the essence of the American Dream. At the end of the novel, the omniscient narrator describes Clemente as follows: “*He could play the game and he had really made the transition. And he knew what he would do*” (150, italics in the original). In his commentary on *Clemente Chacón*, Tomás Vallejos assesses its literary merits and Villarreal’s embattled relations with his critics:

Villarreal provides much insight into the cultural, psychological, societal, and ethical conflicts of an upwardly mobile Mexican American [...] Structurally, this third novel is more complex than his other books, the work of a more experienced writer [...] at other times it seems bogged down with events and propagandistic dialogue that serve no purpose but to criticize those Chicano militants who gave Villarreal such grief in the early 1970s. (287, 288)

Vallejos’ analysis is reasonable in his implicit preference to ignore negative reviews from critics, however Villarreal, a war veteran, was fully aware that he lived in an unreasonable world. Outdistancing the mere settling of accounts with his Chicano critics, Villarreal’s insightful grasp of the Chicano movement’s proscription of any form of self-criticism proved prophetic: he saw in Chicano political rhetoric and “activism” astute modes of self-advancement, American-style. I will return to this topic below. The grief or, better yet, the disappointment caused by Chicano militants and the negative reviews of *Pocho* have been summarized by Vernon Lattin, with references to academic critics who argued for the rejection of *Pocho* because of Villarreal’s unwillingness “to write for barrio audiences”; for his refusal “to promote a specific social or political issue”; and because, “Richard Rubio makes the mistake of being an individualist and thus fails to identify with *la raza*” (1979: 184).<sup>4</sup> Lattin

---

<sup>4</sup> Vernon Lattin was among the first to argue for Joyce’s influence in Villarreal during the writing of *Pocho*, both on the theme of “the portrait of the artist as a young man,” as well as for turning the reader’s attention away from the customary classification as a *Bildungsroman* (coming of age story); instead, Lattin categorized *Pocho* as a *Künstlerroman* (a narrative of the life of an artist, 185). Although Villarreal’s readings of Joyce are documented in the research and correspondence (9 May 1991 letter from Villarreal, from which I quote below), the source of the epiphanies in *Pocho* is not Joyce but Nietzsche, who influenced not only Joyce but also Martin Heidegger, as illustrated throughout the latter’s work, specifically in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1936), from which I quote a passage: “The word *techne* denotes rather a *mode of knowing*. To know means to have seen, in the widest sense of seeing, which means *to apprehend what is present*, as such. For Greek thought the nature of knowing consists in *aletheia*,

criticized the critics as follows: “*Pocho* has been attacked as an assimilationist novel preaching integration, its author seen as a *pocho* himself who presents stereotypes of the Mexican American people. The protagonist’s individualism has been seen as the author’s denial of *el pueblo* and his heritage. *The novel needs to be judged on its own terms*” (185, my emphasis).<sup>5</sup> Early into the Chicano movement, Villarreal dealt with his critics with the aim and intelligence of his early boxing experience, as demonstrated publicly at the 1975 session sponsored by the Modern Language Association on Chicano literature:

With rare exceptions, most [Chicano literary critics are] totally lacking in sensibility, never having developed an *emotional and intellectual apprehension or responsiveness to aesthetic phenomena* [...] Despite my *anger*, all this has had little adverse effect on my writing primarily because I began writing long before the emergence of the current wave of social protest [...] Such criticism is disturbing, whether it is about my work or someone else’s. It is disturbing mainly because I know what it can do to our young, potentially unfulfilled writers. And all writers who have a Spanish surname *will carry the ethnic label*, whether by design or not, and will be subject to Movement criticism. It is, unfortunately, the nature of that particular criticism to subvert rather than to encourage the artist. (1979: 164, 165, my emphasis)

---

that is, in *the uncovering of beings*. *Techne*, as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a *bringing forth of beings* in that it *brings forth* present beings as such beings *out of concealedness* and specifically *into the unconcealedness of their appearance*; *techne* never signifies the action of making” (57, my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> In our correspondence Villarreal would comment on his life in rural Santa Clara: “You see, during the years I have often been ridiculed for my neglect of the inequities suffered by Mexican-Americans. They [critics] assumed that I had been raised in a Mexican ghetto, had suffered all manner of indignities and was insensitive to the abuses against us perpetrated by the dominant class—in short—I wished to be “white,” I was a *vendido*. I was even asked more than once why I did not make Zelda a chicanita [it should be understood] that the Mexican immigrants were from the provinces and had brought their strict religious morality with them and a young Mexican girl would never be allowed to be out in the streets alone day or night. Also, there were few Mexicans in my town, none in my neighborhood” (Personal correspondence, 13 June 1991). Plagued by well-intended critics who called him a “Chicano” writer, Villarreal always began his lectures by clarifying that he was not part of the Chicano generation. In one of his letters, Villarreal returned to this question: “I am not to be referred to as a Chicano writer nor a Chicano. If my name must be qualified, it should be Mexican because I am a Mexican citizen, or Mexican American because I am that also. I can do nothing about POCHO being called a Chicano novel, even though I do not believe it should be a part of that sub-genre” (personal letter, 5 April 1991).

These words were also prophetic. In pursuit of a life as a writer, Villarreal had in mind Emerson's idea of an education of one's moral sense and range of understanding (1984: 459).<sup>6</sup> Chicano nationalism made no sense to Villarreal. In his view, Mexican Americans were American citizens, a birthright often disallowed by white American nationalists. At the center of what Villarreal had in mind when referring to Chicano critics and their negative reviews was the introduction to *Pocho*'s 1970 paperback edition, authored by Chicano historian Ramón E. Ruiz, titled "On the Meaning of Pocho." It set the tone and reading directives for subsequent criticism by Ruiz's followers that fell on Villarreal in the 1970s-1990s, therefore during the heyday and aftermath of the Chicano movement.

In historical terms, the release of *Pocho*'s paperback edition coincided with the escalation of the war in Vietnam and, more specifically, with the National Chicano Moratorium Committee Against the Vietnam War, held in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970. The moratorium, which drew thousands of people, was spearheaded by Chicano community leaders and university student activists, along with the Brown Berets, protesting against the war, and portraying themselves as members of a "national Chicano" committee. During the Vietnam War, South Vietnamese people who sympathized with the North Vietnamese were labeled Viet Cong, meaning "communist traitors" to the Vietnamese nation. In the logic of the times, the meanings of *pocho* and Mexican American were understood as synonymous with *traitors* to the Chicano nation, an entity which obviously did not exist on the map. After praising Villarreal for being "the first man of Mexican parents to produce a novel" about the American Southwest, Ruiz turns to his appraisal of *Pocho*:

---

<sup>6</sup> In one of his letters, Villarreal insisted on (among other matters) the importance of readers in a writer's life. "I have a good number of pieces written when I was young and I have more that I have begun, not all finished for one reason or another, but I have kept them because I believed that in my late years, which is now, I would put all of them in order [...] the second reason I have written has been for the joy of doing it [another reason] is that I want readership. No, I do not write to make money. I have never thought of writing in that sense, but I do want to publish [...] I want readers who do not know us as a people to read about us. I am not at all attracted by the idea that *only* Chicanos and *Chicanitos* will read my work, although I recognize the value of young Mexican-Americans reading POCHO. And I know that that is good" (personal letter, 26 November 1991, my emphasis). Villarreal was not alone in his desire to have readers; Gordon Bowker documents Joyce's depression after reading the reviews of *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Bowker explains: "Beckett later recalled how ill Joyce looked, and how, unhappy with some of the negative reviews of the *Wake*, he even considered simplifying the punctuation to make it easier for the general reader" (518).

In the more than ten years that have elapsed since Villarreal created his characters, the population of Mexican descent, *once docile and apathetic, has awakened*. No longer willing to play *the passive role* envisaged for them by their Anglo *neighbors*, a new generation of Mexican Americans has come of age. Rejecting a multitude of former attitudes and the all-too-frequent *obsequiousness* of yesteryear, *militant leaders and their followers* [...] call themselves *chicanos* [sic] and *demand their share of the good life* in the United States [...] Villarreal's sympathetic portrait of Juan Rubio, the Mexican revolutionary and a leading protagonist in *Pocho*, reveals some of the veneration for Mexican legend found in the lexicon of *chicanismo*. However, the Revolution and the historical roots it represents offer no foundation for a future ideology for Mexican Americans—which it does to *chicanos*. (viii, my emphasis)<sup>7</sup>

Ruiz closes his introduction with a reference to a turning point in Mexican American history: “No longer are *chicanos* ‘lost’ Richards. The militant and the not-so-militant young with Spanish surnames have started to build, not just a regional political movement, but an identity *to replace that sense of inferiority* that settled down upon Richard in *his lonely battle with*

---

<sup>7</sup> As will be remembered, the fictional Heraclio Inés, upon leaving Mexico, considers Francisco Villa's men “a gang to pillage, and kill, and burn for no reason.” Heraclio deplors having shed the blood of his kinsmen, and learns “a sense of order, a sense of logic to laws.” A former revolutionary, Heraclio becomes respectful of established law and plans to return to his people and his culture. In his review of *The Fifth Horseman*, Chicano novelist Alejandro Morales misses in Villarreal's second novel the relative absence of the everyday *peón-esclavo*, although he hails *The Fifth Horseman* as being the first novel with a “Chicano perspective” devoted to the Mexican Revolution, thus establishing connections between Chicano and Mexican literatures. In Morales's words: “Villarreal por primera vez relata el trastorno de 1910 desde *la perspectiva del chicano*. La novela es el primer esfuerzo chicano sobre la Revolución mexicana y con él Villarreal ha abierto la puerta a nuevos temas y establecido otro nexo directo entre la literatura chicana y la mexicana” (136, my emphasis). Five years after the release of *Pocho* in a paperback edition with Ramón E. Ruiz's introduction, and in the midst of negative reviews of *Pocho*, Morales's review carried a significant irony as an independent welcoming act: a Chicano novelist was embracing Villarreal as a fellow Chicano novelist, and praising *The Fifth Horseman* as a breakthrough in the Chicano historical novel. All along, however, Villarreal kept insisting he was not a Chicano writer, asking that his novels not be classified as Chicano literature. And Villarreal was right: published in 1959, *Pocho* was released ten years before the emergence of the Chicano movement. Villarreal's sensibility, generational worldview, and cultural background had their own distinct features, with no connection to world liberation movements of the 60s.

reality” (xii, my emphasis). It is troubling to read an introduction authored by a professor of Latin American history and literature who makes no distinction between *Pocho*’s fictional characters (Juan Rubio, Richard Rubio), the omniscient narrator, and the novelist José Antonio Villarreal. Although Ruiz does not acknowledge the source for his claims of a turning point in Chicano history, his phrasing was unmistakably inspired by *The Plan de Santa Barbara* (1969), the Chicano generation’s “manifesto” that served to contextualize Ruiz’s position against the Mexican American generation to which, ironically, he belonged. The *Plan* opens with the following lines:

Culturally, the word Chicano, in the past a pejorative and class-bound adjective, has now become the root idea of a new cultural identity for our people [...] The widespread use of the term Chicano today signals a rebirth of pride and confidence. *Chicanismo simply embodies an ancient truth: that a person is never closer to his/her true self as when he/she is close to his/her community* [...] Chicanismo involves a crucial distinction in political consciousness between a Mexican American (or Hispanic) and a Chicano mentality. *The Mexican American or Hispanic is a person who lacks self-respect and pride in one’s ethnic and cultural background.* (1, 3, my emphasis)

After the disappointment and annoyance felt when reading Ruiz’s introduction to *Pocho*, Villarreal contacted Doubleday to demand that it be withdrawn from his novel on the basis of fundamental marketing criteria: with such an uncomprehending and negative introduction, readers would be biased before they began to read *Pocho*’s first pages. Villarreal’s request was finally granted nineteen years later in a new edition (1989), with a cover art approved by Villarreal himself, as will be discussed below. *Memories of a Hyphenated Man* (2003), Ramón Ruiz’s autobiography, traces a curb from the beginning of the Chicano movement to its decline, from its dawn to its sunset, illustrating another case of Balzac’s theme of “lost illusions.”<sup>8</sup> Although Ruiz does not mention his introduction to *Pocho*, he

---

<sup>8</sup> In the first chapter of his autobiography *Memories of a Hyphenated Man* (2003), Ruiz rephrases the passage from *The Plan the Santa Barbara*: “As Günther Grass admonished, if one abandons one’s own traditions, one abandons oneself” (19). Although the wrong source, Ruiz remembers the thought behind this passage. In a moment of insight into his psychological scars, Ruiz remembers the prejudice and loneliness of his youth: “We were Mexicans and thus—with the exception of Eva, the youngest of my sisters—were dark of skin, a legacy from out father. Whether we liked it or not, we did not look American (meaning ‘white’), and unkind classmates almost always reminded us of this difference” (19). Such early traumas

recalls the times and context in which he wrote it, beginning with an account of his tenure at Smith College (1958-1970), his proximity to New York editors, and the invitations to review books for the *New York Times* (180). According to Ruiz, the late sixties gave birth to a world Ruiz had not known before: the civil unrest in the United States, the war in Vietnam, and the Chicano movement. He reports on how he saw the opportunity to apply to California universities with the expressed purpose “to teach students of *my flesh and blood*” (196, my emphasis). As he recalls, Ruiz was interviewed by three UC campuses: Davis, Irvine, and San Diego. The first campus wanted Ruiz to teach Chicano history; the second, that Ruiz work with the Chicano community (“I turned down both offers,” 202). He accepted the position at UC San Diego to begin on January 1970 (204), therefore coinciding with the writing of his introduction to *Pocho*. At UC San Diego Ruiz served as department chair for five years, “cleaning house” and hiring “scholars of stature” (208). Ruiz’s high academic standards, however, did not include *his flesh and blood*; as Ruiz admits, he hired only white American faculty. Chicano students and members of other ethnic minorities were not pleased, as he remembered:

There were demands for ethnic history, for minority professors, and for ethnic bureaucrats. Chicanos, graduates in particular, were not forbearing with their mentors [...] I can call up memories of angry Chicanos, blacks, and Asians, among them one of my graduate students, stomping into my office to tell me that I must hire minority historians. When I tried to explain that I wanted to but *that it would take time*, they walked out in a huff. (210-211, my emphasis).

---

are the leitmotif that runs through Ruiz’s memoir, with other similar instances that point to Ruiz’s sense of feeling inferior, of not being part of “the herd,” and of losing his lonely battle with reality when excluded from American society. In his words: “When I was young, people often accused me of being shy, but there were reasons for that shyness; one of them, if not the main one, was my being a Mexican. When young, one wants to be part of the herd; I could not because of my skin color” (46). This passage is of interest because it clarifies that the sense of inferiority based on skin color is not *generational* (solely Mexican American), but one that recurs in U.S. history from the time of the annexation of Texas and the U.S. war of aggression against Mexico (1846-1848), to the virulent anti-Mexican attitudes of white Americans under the recent Trump administration (2017-2020). The fact that Villarreal and Ruiz were born three years apart tells us that their rejection or embrace of Chicano nationalism has no connection to generational differences.