

Borders of the Self in Alfredo Vea's *The Silver Cloud Café*

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In its implications the distortion of a text resembles a murder: the difficulty is not in perpetrating the deed, but in getting rid of its traces.

—Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

Alfredo Vea's second novel, *The Silver Cloud Café* (1996), forms part of a narrative trilogy that includes *La Maravilla* (1993) and *Gods Go Begging* (1999). In terms of its significance within the narrative trilogy, *Silver Cloud* could be considered Vea's attempt to redefine the scope of the Chicano historical novel, raising questions related to Spanish and American imperial histories in a narrative that conjoins the account of the farm worker (Mexican, Hindu, Filipino), the murder mystery, the Gothic tale, and the interpolated historical essay, all written in a language that constantly moves between craft, poetry, and allusion.¹ At the anecdotal level, *Silver Cloud* ties the personal destinies of characters originally born or with ancestry in Asia, Latin America, Africa, or Europe, hence the novel's representation of the city of San Francisco as a geopolitical center.

The present study is limited to *The Silver Cloud Café*, arguably the most difficult novel in the trilogy. In terms of the challenges that Vea's novels make on the reader, I propose that such difficulties derive from fundamental notions that Vea holds regarding his work as a writer, the nature of a literary text, and the expected active interaction of the reader with text and author. As a result, in Vea's novels the writer emerges as a "language-maker" who individualizes expression, values intuitive insight, and sets

the ground for the apotheosis of personal experience, thus revealing Vea's appropriation of an American literary tradition, namely: that of the American Transcendentalists. In addition, the formal features of the trilogy become major reading challenges in areas involving language and narrative syntax, such as narrative juxtapositions, temporal and spatial displacements, and the hermetic or obscure nature of the novels' allusions (e.g., mythical, historical, literary, and autobiographical). Lastly, the interaction desired by Vea between author and reader (e.g., the implied active reader, the tacit critique of reified language, etc.) brings to mind the one proposed by Carlos Fuentes in *Terra Nostra* (1975), and by Julio Cortázar in *Hopscotch* (1963), Latin American novelists who represent a literary tradition that Vea has also claimed as his own. In the appropriation of the dual literary legacy represented by American Transcendentalism and the modern Latin American literary tradition, Vea erases the borders that have quarantined Chicano literary expression within the province of minority or ethnic literature. To be sure, Vea questions minimalist tendencies in the United States that reduce persons to a racial or ethnic identity. For example, when Vea was asked by Kathleen S. Porter about his cultural background, he responded as follows:

I'm Mexican, Yaqui, and Filipino. *But lineage isn't the totality of anybody's cultural background.* I grew up the first few years of my life with Indians on the reservation, and black people from the dust bowl, and a lot of Irish and Okies. So I think those are my cultural background, too. (81; my emphasis)

In previous essays I have discussed Vea's life and the biographical intersections with his work, and have also proposed a reading of *Silver Cloud* that will now be completed, thus establishing a field of analysis where I later intend to situate a comprehensive reading of Vea's narrative trilogy. My present analysis of *Silver Cloud* is based on the theoretical assumption that this novel can be read as a geopolitical allegory through which a national destiny can be imaginatively conceived in narrative form (Jameson 37). The *allegorization* of a world and of its politics implies, so to speak, a rhetorical reinvention of our human

interconnectedness, a cognitive act that would allow us to question and transcend essentialist or “frozen-in-time” notions of race and ethnicity. As a historical novel, *Silver Cloud* turns into an archaeological site where the imperial histories of Spain and the United States are read as the narrative’s intertextual memory, hence a significant dimension in the novel’s analysis.

My critical focus centers on the rhetoric of memory and forgetfulness that serves as the novel’s textual foundation. Constructed as a layered space of personal and historical recollection, memory moves along the double tracks of a character’s *anamnesis*—herein understood as fulfilled *recollection* but also as a personal *case history*—and of a narrative’s memory recalling California farm workers, Mexican *Cristeros*, and Filipino infant Christs, all revived through densely mediated acts of remembrance and intertextual allusions. Introduced as a story of *braceros*, it also includes the voices of forgotten iconoclasts. Consequently, from the *locus infimus* or lowest stratum of the narrative’s intertextual memory surge the dissenting voices of early Christians known as the gnostics; their writings suddenly surface, like a repressed memory, proposing that the heretical be included in our reading of *The Silver Cloud Café*.

I

Written within the scope of an imperial history (Spain and the United States), *Silver Cloud* interconnects the towns of Santo Paulo and Baguio (the Philippines), and the states of Michoacán (Mexico) and California (Stockton, San Francisco), in an intricate web of religious conflicts, fractured loves, and extravagant lives: Faustino, a gay Pinoy in love with the poetry of Constantine Cavafy; Teodoro, a hunchback who pines for the love of a beautiful Irish-Mexican dancer; Bambino Reyes, an earthly parody of Christ who, as “Bambino,” figures as a caricature of the infant Jesus. The surname “Reyes” ‘kings,’ plays simultaneously with connotations of monarchy in the *plural*, thus with the Magi (therefore, by association, with the Contracodger’s homage paid to the child Jesus), and with *imperial conflicts*. Bambino is a fallen man (from the cross, from the church, and as a man): “After years in the church he had renounced his vows to embrace *sandugo*,

vendetta" (241). The novel's cast includes Raphael Viajero, a peripatetic man of visionary powers (only when far from his home in Ocumicho, Michoacán), and whose name—like his archangel namesake—means "God has healed." Among other characters who function in the binomial poison/cure, Father Humberto appears sketched in flames, obsessed with memories of his twin brother's and his own execution by a firing squad, mortified by his own "resurrection" but redeemed by the constant memories of a woman with blue satin heels.

The theme of sacrifice, presented in the novel through symmetrical constructions taken from various world cultures (e.g., Aztec and Maya [205] the ancient Philippines [214] or significant Christian events, such as the Crucifixion [330] achieves its archetypal expression as both malady and monument in an archaic ritual involving the strapping of a living slave beneath the body of the deceased owner. Expressed in an image of hierarchical domination, an analogy is proposed between this ritual and modern colonialism: "That is the true image of the Philippines, strapped beneath the Spanish, beneath the Americans, and even more . . . strapped, struggling and suffocating, below the church. No wonder I can't breathe" (248). In sum, the fateful thematic constellation formed by the fetish, the ancient ritual, the sense of guilt, and the world's *colonial* condition, constitute the cargo in a novel that favors a multidimensional reading.

Silver Cloud is divided into twelve chapters and narrated in an omniscient voice that is well suited to the novel's scope, namely: to articulate a splintered world—the Philippines, the United States, Spain, and Mexico—into a unified geopolitical totality. *Silver Cloud* turns on the double axes of recollection and memory in the configuration of the main character (Zeferino del Campo) and in the novel's narrative arrangement, gravitating on multiple starting points, back-and-forth movements, and on a plot development that defies linearity and the illusions of sequence and "progress." The time of the narration ranges from Zeferino's youth (Stockton, 1959) to his adulthood (San Francisco, May 9-24, 1993), creating in this manner a hiatus of 34 years that correspond to Zeferino's early abandonment (or *expro-*

sonal past, and his subsequent rise from farm worker to lawyer. As a result, Zeferino's remote past, situated in the center of the narrative in Chapters VI and VII, becomes the ground of *remembrance* as well as yet another initial point in one's *reading*, resulting in a cognitive parallel between character and reader; in other words, as Zeferino progressively remembers a traumatic memory of his youth (Chapters I-V), the reader also emerges from the darkness not only in regard to Zeferino's background, but to the ordering logic of a novel whose starting points (and conclusions) are manifold. Organized according to the dynamics of a long-term memory and of a chronological sequence of events, the following three-tiered topography would guide our reading of this novel:

Chronological levels in *The Silver Cloud Café*

1993 San Francisco:

May 9	May 10	May 12	May 14	May 15	May 22	May 24
Ch. IX	Ch. XI	Ch. X	Ch. IV	Ch. I	Ch. II	Ch. VIII
					Ch. XII	Ch. III
						Ch. V

1959 Stockton: Ch. VI

1958 Stockton: Ch. VII

If we imagine this reading sequence as an analytical possibility (therefore choosing *chronology* as a critical starting point), we would begin in 1958 with a chapter inversion (Chapters VII, VI) and proceed vertically (VII, VI, IX), then swerve horizontally to Chapters IX-VIII, thus reaching a conclusion that mirrors its beginning (i.e., a chapter inversion) and traces a sequence of events that constitute the story of a crime mystery (i.e., Bambino's death). Viewed on the surface of first impressions, the sequential episodes would appear to stage Zeferino's encrypted memory (i.e., Pietro Ditto's death and Zeferino's "exposure"); however, the reading puzzle that represents the novel's encrypted event requires at least three analytical maneuvers that would allow us to reconstruct (1) the *background* of the crime (i.e., the death of Bambino's father), (2) the *resolution* of the mystery (i.e., did Teodoro kill Bambino, as he claims?), and (3) Zeferino's personal past organized under the category of a case history. Thus,

the story that unfolds from May 9 to May 24 produces the overall theme of a vendetta (i.e., Bambino avenging Pietro Ditto's death, followed by his own), and yet the narrative's *telos* gravitates towards a (literal or figurative) "before-death" epiphany of sorts in the six characters—Father Humberto, Miguel Govea, Bambino, Faustino, Teodoro, and Zeferino—whose destinies converge in a space of healing: the Silver Cloud Café. Of these characters, four are war veterans who come to terms with the burden of a past crime, wisely posed by Miguel Govea: "every uniform murders the one who wears it" (7).

The novel's narrative structure, consequently, interlaces the dynamics of personal memory, a crime mystery, and what might at first be understood as a chance encounter that triggers Zeferino's anamnesis. In addition, the narrative displays the different layers of an encrypted event that can be analyzed on two different narrative movements that lead to contrasting conclusions, one corresponding to the resolution of guilt, self-immolation, and ultimately to the culmination of the narrative itself (Chapter XII, May 14, 1993), while the second flows on the tracks of historical time (Chapter VIII, May 24, 1993), inverting the syntax of events that occur on May 12 (Faustino's murder, Chapter X) and on May 14, a date that hangs bifurcated as a serpent's tongue: Bambino Reyes' portentous death (Chapter XII), and Father Humberto's sacrificial suicide (Chapter IV). These twin events illuminate Zeferino's own anamnesis of May 22 (charted in a dialectical triple sequence in Chapters II, III, and V), thus exhuming the repressed memory of his youth in Stockton: Pietro Ditto's death (a crime in self-defense), and the destinies of Faustino, Teodoro and Zeferino, brought together by their own exposed status as surplus and unwanted human beings.²

The past was becoming clearer for Zeferino. Something horrible had happened in the asparagus field outside of Stockton, in a place called French Camp. . . . All of them had been here. Every path from the old, seemingly forgotten tragedy in French Camp to the strange killing at the Fourth Street Bridge had crossed right here at Raphael's Silver Cloud! (116)

Zeferino's journey into his own past—in a paradoxically "immobile Checker cab" that runs backwards to Stockton, 1959—

begins with a chorus-like song or subterranean command in Zeferino's unconscious, ordering a gaze homeward, a return that corresponds to a reversal of nature's laws, hence to a symbolic resurrection:

Stop the spinning moon. . . . Call back the time and a dozen cut lilies, once dying in a florist's window, will climb back to their mothering stems; their petals will spread full, then clench back into the greening buds of infancy. Look back in time, and a willful, wanton flame, in its diminishment, will gradually rebuild the wood. (125)³

Read like a dream passage, the "dozen cut lilies," the "mothering stems," the "buds of infancy," and a "willful, wanton flame" form a mental collage that insinuates the fragmented mother-son relationship between Zeferino and his mother Lilly. A later phrase, "the daughters of Eve and Lilith" (237), tacitly establishes a link with a gnostic version regarding Adam's first wife, alluding also to an ancient Hebrew legend similar to *la Llorona*, a female destroyer figure feared by children, thus resulting in the mental association with the themes of *child exposure* and the murder of one's own blood. Moreover, one should note that Chapter XII, although bearing the date of May 14, 1993 (again, the same as in Chapter IV), is segmented into three narrative moments: the confrontation between Teodoro Cabiri and Bambino Reyes (May 14); Teodoro's release from jail (unspecified, but after May 24 [332-38]); and the dispersal and return home of most of the characters, ending with Teodoro's consummated marriage and a fast-forward to a vision of the frontiers of death and beatific love ("behold *la cara de Dios*" [343]), therefore cancelling his former *homeless* condition and corresponding to the final chronological point reached by the narrative (338-43). As a result, this conclusion could be identified generically as a *comedy* and—based on such generic principles—as an allegorical resolution of 65 years of worldly conflicts that have their origin in Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States.

The narrative sequence can now be visualized as resting on historical levels that must be traversed mnemonically by Zeferino and cognitively by the reader. The process of reading, unfolding

according to the narrative's inner logic, traces a major plot trajectory represented by Zeferino's life, from his arrival with his mother Lilly at French Camp (in 1959, Chapter VI)—logically continuing in the *middle* of this novel the anecdotal thread that closes Vea's first novel, *La Maravilla* (1993)—and his subsequent maternal abandonment and the "adoption" by thirty Mexican, Pinoy, and Hindu farmworkers (remembered in Chapter V), followed by his adult life as a criminal defense lawyer in San Francisco (Vea's own profession). In this ironic American success story, with its own *frontier* experience and its upwardly mobile "forgetfulness" (plus the intermittent traces of autobiography in Vea's fiction), the life stages that remain blank in Vea's narrative trilogy are the following: Zeferino's return from Vietnam (partly narrated as Alberto's homecoming in Chapter 15 of *La Maravilla*), and his university education.

II

Zeferino del Campo is first introduced in the second chapter (May 22, 1993), *eight* days after the deaths of Bambino and Father Humberto. Since the novel's first chapter opens with ascending twin angels, an androgynous God, and a view of *braceros* as "heartsick Hebrews brought into Egypt to toil beneath the sun" (1), our retrospective reading of the first two chapters begins to develop an anticipated interpretive field that includes (1) an apocalyptic number (the number 22) associated with revelation and other-worldly visions; (2) the *unspecified* day in May 22, 1993 (Saturday, hence the *sixth* day of the week); and (3) the realization that, counting eight days *in reverse*, one produces a clearer reading of the two men who have been viewed as Christ-like or saintly (Bambino and Father Humberto, respectively): both die on a Friday, therefore in a synchronic parody of the Crucifixion.

As one would expect, the language of numbers does not stop here: a numerical undercurrent is also found in the number four (among others), linked to the four gospels, the four *voladores* of Papantla (205), Bambino's four nails, the Four Seas Corporation (235), Teodoro's family position as the fourth child, and his subsequent site of acquittal: the fourth floor of the Hall of Justice

merology, and historical events (e.g., Revelation, the Vietnam War) in the context of a city like San Francisco, contributes to set the tone for a narrative that playfully and cunningly collects—in the sense of gathering, picking, and harvesting—from several civilizations and from different historical epochs.⁴

Zeferino enters our field of vision, as a result, under a portentous background and in the vicinity of City Hall, surrounded by a social world of homeless people, war veterans, transvestites, contending factions of protesters, and a motley group of Third World representatives—Zapotec Mexicans, Cambodian monks, Laotian and Vietnamese families—who have crossed frontiers and have fallen into the “bottom line” of Corporate America. Inhabitants of a darkening world, their appearance might be read as the collective analogue of Zeferino’s psychological condition as a war veteran, therefore symptomatic of the crisis within a “system” whose synecdochic representation is none other than City Hall. On this view, a Gothic aesthetic serves to describe this agitated collectivity whose presence pulsates with “underworld” features: “Like living ghosts, they haunted the corners and curbs of the city, carving out cold cloisters and hidden catacombs in the full light of day. . . . It was as though they had all been thrown down from the sky” (17). Considering the context, Zeferino’s memory can be expected to function through rhetorical mediations associated with biblical stories (e.g., the Lazarus story), psychological theories (e.g., repression), premonitions, and geological phenomena (e.g., earthquakes, volcanic activity, etc.). As Zeferino remembers the devastations of war in Vietnam (brought to mind by the view of protesting Vietnam War veterans in front of City Hall), he hears the name Bambino Reyes and, on the threshold of a premonition, is suddenly thrown down the strata of a layered memory:

Zeferino turned his eyes from the carnage. It had taken him years to free himself from the horrid, otherworldly vision. He no longer envisioned it on his own, but he could still see it in the eyes of others. . . . Zeferino smiled, but images of machetes and mutilations were filling his mind. *He was anxious to get to jail* . . . The images in his mind that should have been the vague product of

imagination were somehow becoming sharper, almost as though they were the product of memory. (29-30; my emphasis)

This passage, hermetically closed to full analysis on the first reading, appears to have been written with the entire novel in mind, mixing repressed memories of two sites: Stockton and Vietnam. Indeed, this passage points to a future anamnesis, to fragments of repressed memories (“machetes” and “mutilations”) which are, simultaneously, revelatory of a remote crime (Pietro Ditto’s) and of the recent fates suffered by Faustino and Bambino (i.e., as a resolution of Pietro’s killing), and, lastly, to an unconscious desire to meet the man in jail who claims to have killed Bambino and who might have the key to his past. True to expectations, such an eventful meeting takes place in Chapter III (on the same apocalyptic day, May 22), with the flood of memories surging after the utterance of yet another name (his own):

Zeferino remembered him instantaneously, the moment his childhood name was uttered. The single memory pushed upward through a deep submergence and tried to carry with it a thousand others, pushing up simultaneously, painfully, opening layer upon layer of sleeping thoughts, sequestered by-gones. His mind went almost white for an instant as the blood left his brown face. (48)

Interpreted as Zeferino’s primal theater of memory, one could view this passage as being divided into three acts or parts, with the reference to a sudden recollection (“remembered him instantaneously”) accompanied by a slow-motion description, with a language associated with geological or volcanic activity (“pushed upward,” “a deep submergence,” “opening layer upon layer”), or with Christianity’s ruling mystery, namely: the body’s resurrection, rising from its grave on Judgment Day. The third part closes with a chromatic symbolism present throughout the novel—crimson as well as white, colors found in Faustino’s memory (148), in the attire of altar boys (221), in Bambino’s skin color (249), in the colors of the apocalyptic beast and the dove, and, among other associations, “from the white of epiderm to the deep rose” in Father Humberto’s penitential flesh (60)—and with a clear suggestion of a “sudden death” or break in consciousness as Zeferino’s blood leaves his brown face, momentarily en-

dowing him with a *white* one (after all, having risen from farm worker to lawyer, Zeferino has become “white” thanks to his American success). Two days later—that is to say, 160 pages afterwards and in the last chapter (in Chapter VIII, if one figures chronologically)—Teodoro Cabiri affectionately mocks Zeferino because of having crossed a *frontier* of sorts: “Did you know that your accent is completely gone, Zefe? When I first met you, you spoke English like a little *mojado*. Even after all of these years, I still have my accent” (209).

The narrative spacing of Zeferino’s anamnesis is thus composed of four major nodal points where the institutionalized “primal scene” of Chicano ethnicity—thematically suggested as if to recall in order to critique—is reintroduced and transcended. The theme of a retrieved *ethnic* identity—a governing theme in Chicano narrative beginning with Oscar Z. Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972)—surfaces in our reading through the motif of the *brown face*, but is swiftly cancelled *against* the reader’s expectations (after all, we are reading a Chicano novel) in favor of a kinship system that can not be entirely comprehended through the language of race or ethnicity. Opening in the second chapter with an overture of premonitions (“as though an unnamed and untapped memory” [22]), and with a world of crack-cocaine addicted characters, Zeferino’s remembrance achieves a progressive manifestation on May 22—that is to say, in Chapter II (30), in Chapter III (48), in Chapter V (87, 117, 122, 124), and in Chapter VIII (208, 217, 223, 228)—and on an unidentified date subsequent to May 24: Chapter XII (“Now he remembered all of it, every detail” [334]).

The spacing of Zeferino’s anamnesis, consequently, is marked with intermittent signposts throughout the entire novel, first appearing on a course towards an ethnic consciousness, but as of Chapter V—through the theme of *adoption*—moving with a quite different narrative flow beyond race and ethnicity, namely towards a geopolitical identity rewritten in the folds of a kinship system based on *interdependence* and constituted by those who protected and cared for him: “‘They were Mexicans, Pinoys, and Hindus, all missing a day’s pay . . . for me.’ Zeferino paused while the power of the memory washed over him” (124). Teodoro’s

ironic rebuke (“your accent is completely gone”), consequently, more than an admonishment to remember an ethnic background, acquires a complexity that includes the language of a repressed kinship system that comprehends the structural components of Zeferino’s rise from farm worker to lawyer: humble birth—the child’s exposure→ adoption→ the “wilderness” or lost years—the social success→ and the *return of the repressed*. The cryptographic connection to the Moses story surfaces at this juncture as an *intertextual memory*, operating as a figural undercurrent that shapes our analysis of the novel and of Zeferino as a character. Following the mild rebuke, Teodoro asks Zeferino if he remembers the images of rich people driving by while they—modern-day heartsick Hebrews toiling beneath the sun—crouched in the endless furrows of California’s farmlands:

Zeferino inhaled deeply, then closed his eyes to remember his *tios* and *tiyos* in the prime of their lives, sweating away their days for a slave’s wage. The images of his childhood came easily now and the fact pleased him. “Because of you and Faustino and so many others, Teodoro . . . I could never wish to trade places with those people driving by . . . I would never trade my newly found memories for someone else’s memories of a childhood in the suburbs.” (228)

At this point in our reading, a ruling center can be discerned in the narrative sequence of Chapters V-VII wherein Zeferino’s anamnesis becomes the initial threshold into a *relived* past (the taxi ride back to Stockton, 1959), therefore a mirroring analogue of Chapter VIII, where one learns of Teodoro’s own detailed memory regarding his early youth in the Philippines, unwanted by his own family because of his physical condition. Associated by the theme of parallel destinies, Zeferino remembers in Chapters VI-VII the violent event that changed the lives of Faustino, Teodoro, and young Zeferino, namely Faustino’s killing of Bambino’s father while protecting Zeferino. Zeferino’s career as a criminal defense lawyer, consequently, achieves a supplement of *unconscious* motivation in the underlying American depths of his “success story,” influenced by a repressed memory of exposed vulnerability. Rejected by the boy’s mother, Pietro Ditto transfers his resentment to Zeferino (“. . . no goddamn skirt turns her

back on me!" [190]), thereby manifesting in his displaced anger the ironic complexities of lust, hatred, and criminality—in other words, of a pathology ranging from the desire to be counted among Zeferino's *many adoptive fathers* and, after Lilly's rejection, to the resentment that seethes with a murderous intent. The theme of displaced anger takes us to Teodoro's own anamnesis:

"I remember now!" cried Ted For Short as the entire China Basin turned fluorescent white. . . . "Your mother hadn't seen what I saw in your face. No one else saw it. But I saw it. You were dying up there," screamed Ted For Short, "bleeding to death from the four nails. The hole they had dug for your cross was filling with your blood. You didn't want to live anymore . . . and I made them take you down."

Following this sudden recollection, Bambino answers:

"She saw it," said Bambino in a new voice. Beneath the hard tenor of the man was the tremulous alto of the boy. "Oh, my blessed mother saw it, all right. What a windfall my death would have been for her, a life of leisure and eternal consolation! She saw it, *but it was you that I chose to despise.*" (330-31; my emphasis)

Such distortion and displacement of motives suggest the complex nature of criminal transgressions, endowing every act with a layered intentional foundation that inevitably would encourage prejudice and prompt resolution. The governing theme of good and evil, along with the cosmic overtones in the narrative, generate different levels of reading that include—as instruments of interpretation—textual allusions, iconographic associations, and the symbolism of numbers, meaningfully acknowledged by Teodoro: "There's a combination out there, a sequence of numbers that is somehow known to algae and budding schoolboys; and when those numbers are lined up, all the tumblers fall" (210). If we recall that there are *eight* days between the parodic and fateful Friday (May 14) and Zeferino's apocalyptic anamnesis (May 22); if one remembers that the novel concludes *chronologically* in Chapter VIII; and that Teodoro is jailed in the seventh floor of the Hall of Justice, but guarded by a deputy at Post 8; moreover, that the Hall of Justice, described in cosmic metaphors, also reaches metaphysical dimensions through its

architectural symbolism and the apocalyptic numerology found in the interplay of numbers seven and eight (“the beast that once was alive and is alive no longer, he is an eighth—and yet he is one of the seven, and he is going to perdition” [Rev. 17:11]).⁵ In sum, if our reading memory gathers these passages and keeps track of this numerological pattern as an intertextual activity, the narrative’s levels of meaning will include the following, in *reversed*, inverted or parodic forms: (1) Good Friday (paronomastic for the Crucifixion); (2) a personal “rebirth” (i.e., coming to full consciousness of oneself) on a day associated with the *absolute end* (the number 22); (3) the narrative’s conclusion according to the plot’s *chronological end*; (4) the symbolic place of *judgment* for Teodoro because of Bambino’s death; and (5) the number of the beast as a *mystery* (because a *twin* figure: “he is an *eighth*—and yet he is one of the seven”) embodied by a series of “doubles” throughout the novel. In this world of mysterious correspondences, the beast is none other than Bambino Reyes who, by May 22, *is alive no longer*, killed by an “awesome blow from the celestial shaft” (331). Conversely, the three-and-a-half foot tall Teodoro, in his parodic *twin* function in relation to Bambino, acquires an ironic biblical symbolism when read in the context of his close friend—Faustino, the gay Pinoy—and the latter’s gift to Father Humberto: a Bible, with a reading mark on a significant passage (“stuck in the Book of Revelations, Chapter 11” [118]):

But when they have completed their testimony, the beast that comes up from the abyss will wage war upon them and will defeat and kill them. Their corpses will lie in the street of the great city, whose name in allegory is Sodom, or Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For *three days and a half* men from every people and tribe, of every language and nation, gaze upon their corpses and refuse them burial. (Rev. 11: 7-9; my emphasis)

The mental connections to be made (generated in part by a narrative clue found “stuck” in Faustino’s gift to Father Humberto) are thus between (1) a *City of Sin* (e.g., Sodom, Egypt, San Francisco), (2) the beast’s temporary triumph (e.g., Bambino’s murder of Faustino), (3) the length of time that is

identical to Teodoro's *height* (three and a half feet), and (4) the "multicultural" setting where a funerary rite—at first not observed (Bambino's body "looked as though it had been floating in the ocean for weeks" [2])—leads later to a form of *advent* and *resurrection* (Rev. 11:11), followed by an *ascension* ("And they went up to heaven in a cloud" [Rev. 11: 12]), hence interweaving the plot and thematic structures of *The Silver Cloud Café* with those of Revelation. According to McGuinn, Revelation is a biblical text that is "full of secret allegories at whose original reference we can only guess," but generally applied to "the unprecedented world-historical crisis" of any era (523). Be that as it may, our reading must grasp the "world-historical crisis" in the narrative itself based on the proposed notion of a geopolitical allegory:

But geopolitics conducts us back again from the earth and the planet to the world and to the world as a world of *spirit*. Geopolitics is none other than a *Weltpolitik* of spirit. The world is not the earth. On the earth arrives an obscuring of the world: the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the massification of man, the preeminence of the mediocre. (Derrida 45-46)

This passage alone could be our port of entry into the narrative world of Alfredo Vea, and we will return to it later for further comment. In the meantime, our working assumption must rest on the possibility that *The Silver Cloud Café's* overdetermined numerological pattern might contribute to the resolution of the tension between the narrative's fictionality and its historical correlations. In addition, it should also clarify the nature of the novel's central "mystery"—namely, the narrative's encrypted event. If we proceed with the knowledge known to budding schoolboys, the "story" emerging when number eight is *lined up* (along with numbers seven and nine) corresponds to a narrative based on a gender *reversal* in contrast to the known story in Revelation, Chapter 12: in other words, instead of the woman who gives birth to a male child but, when confronted by a child-eating dragon, *abandons* it ("fled into the wilds"), *The Silver Cloud Café* contains the story of a metaphorical *twin mother* (i.e., the gay Faustino and the hunchback Teodoro) who *protect* Zeferino

from Bambino, the novel's apocalyptic dragon. The notion of "protectors" and "messengers" in a world that constitutes an earthly analogue of Hell achieves its full significance in two places, one in the *absolute beginning* of the novel (the dedication), and the second in a major intertextual work that functions as yet another "subtext" throughout *The Silver Cloud Café*—namely, *The Divine Comedy*.

To begin with, the novel's dedication is on behalf of immigrants to the United States ("whose vision of America is always the truest"); to all migrant farmworkers ("past and present"); and, "above all," to the *manong* and braceros, "the gentle protectors and messengers of my brown youth." With references to *messengers* in the context of an earthly hell, one turns to Dante's *Inferno* only to find that, according to Mark Musa's introduction, "at sunset *on the eve of Good Friday*, Virgil and his ward enter the Gate of Hell" (50; my emphasis); moreover, a "'messenger' from above descends to save the Pilgrim (or Everyman), just as, in the First Advent, Christ descended to save mankind" (53); lastly:

There can only be one place for the Second Advent, the coming of Christ into the hearts of Christians *every day*. We see it at precisely the point in the *Purgatory*, Canto VIII, that corresponds to the point at which we witnessed the First Advent in the *Inferno*, Canto IX . . . then it is clear that *Inferno* IX = *Purgatory* VIII. The two angels who descend to take their places . . . are two who come as one Christ figure. (Musa 53; my emphasis)

Moving from the dedication to the main body of the narrative, we detect a symbolic pattern in number eight, leading to an understanding of *The Silver Cloud Café's* numerological structure, of its intertextual scope (with Revelation and Dante's work as major subtexts), to a reflection on the origins of "evil" (62), and to the frontiers of the novel's encrypted event (i.e., Zeferino's *buried memory*). The tumblers begin to fall when we recall that Bambino's *advent* ("far from the misty shores of paradise" [232]) takes place in *Chapter IX* and on *May 9, 1993*, thus uncovering a direct symbolic symmetry with *The Divine Comedy* in the notions of *advent* and of *twin* figures.⁶ On this point, Vea affirms:

“nine is a magic number. It’s a magic number for both the Yaqui and the Catholics” (Porter 86). In such “bicultural” but highly conflictive context, the accumulated apocalyptic imagery achieves an added symbolism in the sum total of the year itself: $1+9+9+3 = 22$.

To recapitulate: read as the guiding force of the narrative, the trope of a multilayered memory extends to rhetorical manifestations in architectural, metaphysical, and world-historical symbolism. The hierarchical organization of various halls, cafés, convents, and brothels—most of them presented as chosen sites of convergences for a fallen and yet often uncommon humanity—operates within an axis of opposition that divides places such as the Hall of Justice, the Silver Cloud Café, the House of Blue Heels, *Los Infiernos*, and *El Club Michoacán*, in allegorical levels of Heaven and Hell.⁷ For example, in one of the opening scenes of the second chapter, Zeferino walks through the “hell” of San Francisco streets accompanied by his friend Stuart, a Jewish private investigator with cabalistic obsessions, whose surname changes according to the situation. Stuart asks Zeferino a Dantesque question as he surveys the “sprawling city around him”: “Which one of us . . . is going to be Virgil?” (26). Although left unanswered, a textual reading soon identifies Teodoro as Zeferino’s guide in the journey through the *dark wood* of his past; and although intertextually Stuart’s question tacitly interconnects Dante’s work with *The Silver Cloud Café*, a third reading option—let’s call it *introtextual* in the sense of gazing *inside* a corpus of texts by the same writer—is made accessible when we consider that Stuart resonates with memories of another character in *La Maravilla*—Harold, a former prisoner and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. Stuart’s question, concerned with the identity of a *guiding figure* (i.e., guide, mentor, leader, Führer) as they prepare to enter into a multi-storied universe (i.e., the city, the Hall of Justice, Zeferino’s memory, etc.), appears to tremble with the anxieties of a repressed memory that is both political (a “worldly” anti-semitism) and historical (Hitler’s crematoriums). As they cross the threshold marked by the flames of a symbolic hell, Stuart—like Harold before him—might be imagining

(through the darkness of a collective memory) the act itself of being burned alive only to be “re-created anew and flawless” (Véa, *La Maravilla* 202).

III

The Silver Cloud Café draws its own symbolic map of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven by charting multiple reference points, among them a painting: José Clemente Orozco’s mural, *El hombre en su hoguera* (“Man on his Pyre,” 1939), commissioned for Guadalajara’s *Hospicio Cabañas*—formerly an orphanage—during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The Christian concept of a cosmic trinity—fundamental in Dante’s work—is secularized and de-Christianized in Orozco’s mural, establishing a human hierarchy that reflects Dante’s levels as fully achieved by a wordly humanity, with *homo sapiens* and *infimus homo* as human extremes. As an “intermediate man,” *el hombre intermedio* hangs in the middle, thus representing in a trinitarian unity an allegory of the human condition.⁸ Expressions of a metaphysical tradition grounded in Christianity, the works by Dante and Orozco grant similar meanings and important functions to fire: light, flame, and coals—*lux*, *flamma*, *carbo*. The first is for the elect; for “those who must be purged” is given the second; the third is for the damned (Le Goff 247). Véa’s rhetoric of fire, however, has many tongues that speak about genocide, punishment, guilt, lust, purification, self-renewal, epiphanies, and—as spirit—freedom. In addition, one comes across selected otherworldly dialects: fire is also associated with ashes and revenants, hence the *ghostly* and apparitional (Derrida 32).

A previous assertion will allow us to place a few stakes as territorial markers in a provisional interpretive field that would serve as a site for a more detailed analysis of the narrative structure of *The Silver Cloud Café*. The assertion pointed to the cognitive parallel between Zeferino del Campo and the reader to the extent that the former’s ground of *remembrance* constitutes a parallel *reading* problem in terms of “starting points” and in the overall ordering logic of the narrative. Based on the present analysis, I am proposing the following analytical model as an initial attempt to grasp an ingenious and remarkably lucid narrative

arrangement reminiscent of Father Humberto's three-tiered houses of pleasure. Divided into three levels according to the character that stamps each level with his presence (e.g., Father Humberto's, Teodoro's, and Bambino's), and regulated by the background, setting, and outcome of the crimes and suicide that occur between May 10-14, 1993, the entire narrative can be visualized as follows:

Anecdotal Clusters in *The Silver Cloud Café*

I <i>May 15, 1993</i> Day after the alleged crime	II-III <i>May 22</i> Meeting of Lawyer and Defendant	IV <i>May 14</i> Father Humberto's death	
V <i>May 22, 1993</i> Lawyer's <i>anamnesis</i>	VI-VII <i>1959, 1958</i> Lawyer's "journey" to his past	VIII <i>May 24</i> Defendant's <i>anamnesis</i>	
IX <i>May 9, 1993</i> Bambino's Arrival	X <i>May 12</i> Faustino's death	XI <i>May 10</i> Teodoro's Wedding	XII <i>May 14</i> Bambino's death

Layered in these anecdotal clusters according to the narrative's chapter sequence, the upper and intermediate levels deploy the narrative device of intercalation, thus interrupting the already *inverted* sequence of Chapters I (May 15) and IV (May 14) with a fast-forward in Chapters II-III (May 22); next, the intermediate level intercalates the "origin" of Zeferino's repressed memory between the *sequential* immediacy of Chapters V (May 22) and VIII (May 24), therefore mirroring the upper level and drawing around Zeferino a magic circle composed of *three* dates: 1959; May 22, 1993; and May 24, 1993. Lastly, in the *locus infimus* or lowest level, Zeferino is in a narrative Limbo in his role as lawyer; as such, he is called upon *after* the crime (he reenters the narrative in Chapter XII, but several days after May 14, only to be present during Teodoro's acquittal and the latter's last question to Zeferino: "Do you really believe in angels?" [338]). Without a doubt, the character who governs this level is Bambino Reyes, with Chapters IX (May 9) and XII (May 14) interrupted

by two chronologically *inverted* chapters, X (May 12) and XI (May 10), containing the narration of Bambino's first act of revenge (Faustino's murder) and the novel's wedding (Teodoro's) on the day Mexicans observe Mother's Day.

The division into three levels of anecdotal clusters (following the novel's *linear*, although non-chronological, chapter sequence) is the product of a reading that—contrary to conventional novels that are based on sequential plot constructions and promote the figure of a protagonist—confronts instead a narrative that reduces the “protagonist” to just another character in the novel's drama. As a result, the three anecdotal clusters contain *three* different, although interconnected, *biographical* sketches that clone or reproduce the problem of memory as represented by Zeferino. Thus, the upper level “hides” the key to the crime (one side of the novel's *mystery*) in the sense that it was Father Humberto who planned and caused Bambino's death (with some “divine” help). On the other hand, the interplay between appearances and reality, admittedly, creates its own levels of interpretation. For instance, while Teodoro claims to have killed Bambino (the reason for his imprisonment), the “real” agents of Bambino's death were Father Humberto, Raphael Viajero's neon angels, and the infallible marksmanship of God's wrath. As one would expect, the intermediate level is under Teodoro's direction; in his request that Zeferino be his lawyer, he functions as the *guide* to the hero's remembrance and homecoming; secondly, he serves as the privileged point of view in regards to the background of the crime (e.g., the 1959 death of Pietro Ditto) and of Zeferino's exposure, registered in a back-and-forth narrative movement that, beginning in Chapter V (Zeferino's present), soon shifts to Teodoro's own past in Chapter VIII (in fact, this chapter ends with Teodoro still in jail and mourning for his metaphorical twin brother Faustino, remembering his childhood and the day they first met in the Philippines). The conclusion of the intermediate level mirrors the upper level where Father Humberto, encloistered in his silver tower, remembers his past and mourns the death of his own twin brother.

We may then affirm that the upper and intermediate levels contain the *mystery* of the crime and its background or conflict.

tive origin, respectively, and that the *locus infimus* or bottom level discloses the *real* nature of the conflict that led to the crime itself (therefore, the *resolution* of the intermediate level and the *clarification* of the upper level). In other words, this would explain the inversion of dates in Chapters I and XII: first the mystery, followed by the clarification in the conclusion, but with the *resolution* somewhere else—namely in Chapter VIII.⁹ Conceived as an organic whole, this third anecdotal cluster opens with Bambino's arrival and with his initial stalking of two of his intended victims (Faustino, Teodoro), followed by his murder of Faustino and concluding with his own death under an "awesome blow from the celestial shaft" (331). As stated previously, Bambino's own repressed memory conceals his refusal to despise his own mother, who was willing to see him die a martyr's death; instead, he vows a vendetta on Faustino, Teodoro and Zeferino. Our analysis must, consequently, operate on three fronts: (1) *homelessness* (Father Humberto, Teodoro, Bambino and Zeferino); (2) the *pairing* of brothers (literal and metaphorical); and (3) a *combat myth* governing the entire novel. The possibility of such vertical reading results in symmetrical conclusions for each proposed level, sketching in each case the profile of a figure that falls into the flames of *guilt* (Father Humberto in Chapter IV), of *remorse* (Teodoro in Chapter VIII), or of symbolic *damnation* (e.g., Bambino's desired identity with Christ, narrated in Chapters VIII [221] and XII [330]).

Cast against a Promethean sky, Father Humberto's fall from his silver tower is described according to the thematics of spirit (i.e., flames, human intelligence, and the guest/ghost) and in the language of art, metaphysics, and history. For instance, let's consider the allusions to José Clemente Orozco's mural *El hombre en su hoguera* in relation to the "flaming arrow" used to kill Bambino ("Orozco's pit of fire" [54], repeated verbatim on page 328) and to Father Humberto's own suicide, told in a language that unexpectedly combines Lucifer's emblematic fall (beginning sentence) with Jesus's crucifixion (the concluding sentence): "He spread his arms . . . then stepped suddenly into the night air, plummeting the two stories to earth. Flapping his arms did nothing to slow the fall. The crowd below, like Romans of old, fully expected

the singular man to lift off and soar into the skies" (77). The "heretical" association of contrasting figures such as Lucifer and Christ produces the image of *twin brothers*, functioning in this context literally (Father Humberto's twin brother, Miguel Augustine Pro, beatified in 1986), and rhetorically (Father Humberto's symbolic twin, Bambino). The contrasting levels, as a result, manifest the *real* solution to the murder mystery, underlining a metaphorical connection between Father Humberto, Bambino, and Teodoro as penitential or "purgatorial" *extremes* who, in addition to exhibiting twin traits, govern and bring to conclusion each anecdotal level. In a parallel situation of "falling," Teodoro remembers his and Bambino's crucifixion:

It wasn't Bambino who beat me. It was God Himself. . . it was also God who caused Bambino to fall into the fire. . . . Can you imagine how my guilty heart soared as the men struggled vainly to regain their balance? . . . I rejoiced as the coals seared his side. But when he called out from the flames to Jehovah, his Father, I knew all was lost, that Bambino had scored a Catholic touchdown. All processions in the future would attempt to reenact his fall into the flame. Burning children, years into the future, would practice crying out according to the Bambino Reyes legend. (222)

The notion of homelessness is thus expressed in various forms that range from Lucifer's fall (i.e., his own heavenly "eviction"), to an actual fall from the cross, a cunning improvisation that results, in Bambino's case, in *immigration* ("the smoking, scalded boy would win a trip to faraway California to study in a seminary" [249]), in a suicide, and in a personal remorse (Teodoro's). Consistent with the novel's interplay between appearance and reality or, in the case of memory, congruent with Freud's idea of the return of the repressed, Teodoro's memory has been "distorted" by his own sense of guilt, translating retroactively an actual occurrence through a "substitutive satisfaction" (Freud 127). When Teodoro finally confronts Bambino in Chapter XII, his memory of the past radically changes ("I remember now!"), recalling that he actually saved Bambino's life ("I made them take you down" [330]). The Gothic elements that stem from these four *aberrant* figures—the Devil, the monk, the priest, and the

imagery (e.g., a hunchback in love with his Mexican-Irish Esmeralda, Radiant Ruby), as well as Romanticism's "dark" side, as found for example in the Gothic tale of Ambrosio's sexual temptation and perversion in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). The intensely drawn cases of Bambino's libidinal sadism, and of Father Humberto's fetishism and ocular glee while peeping through the planks of a brothel beneath his attic, would seem to be taken from Gothic imagery that somehow touches on Christianity's limits and contradictions. To be sure, more than the repression of the body, or the impossibility of such renunciation, the questions that surge with Bambino's charred face and Father Humberto's lacerated and poisoned body are traumatic manifestations stemming from unresolved biblical matters associated with questions of reading and interpretation.

In the reading of the creation story, for instance, the nature of sin was interpreted either as sexual or as an act of disobedience; under the influence of St. Augustine, the orthodox (straight-thinking) position within the church agreed with his "sexualized interpretation of sin" (Pagels, *Adam* xxvi). To the gnostics, on the contrary, the reading of Genesis turned on issues related to moral freedom and moral responsibility; the "fall," consequently, was interpreted as a fall into the "ordinary consciousness" and loss of contact with humanity's own divine origin (Pagels, *Adam* 65). As if to challenge the "straight-thinkers," the gnostic gospel entitled *The Testimony of Truth* recounts the story of creation from the serpent's point of view; in addition, a gnostic poem, entitled *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, reveals its "pagan" framework by the obvious association of Jove/Jehovah through the figure of *thunder* and in its inclination towards paradox and scandal: "I am the first and the last / I am the honored one and the scorned one / I am the whore and the holy virgin / I am the bride and the bridegroom / and it is my husband who begot me" (Pagels, *Adam* 67). Daringly smuggled across narrative frontiers by Vea, this gnostic tradition enjoys a "scandalous" illustration in Father Humberto's views on virginity:

Humberto loved the very idea of the dark-eyed Moslem and Hindu consort angels who regained their virginity in paradise by losing it

over and over again, by giving pleasure as a heavenly reward. He considered it to be such a pleasant conundrum, to prevail through continual surrender. It seemed so much more civilized than the sexless angels of Christian lore. (78-79)

The *secularized* version(s) of Jesus's teachings produced in the Nag Hammadi texts, generally known as the gnostic gospels (discovered in Upper Egypt in 1945), has led to a reconsideration of traditional *unorthodox* Christian views and to the reinstatement of old questions, including the role of women in the church and the meaning of the resurrection (Pagels, *Gnostic* 150). For our present purposes, this *recovered* gnostic tradition enters Chicano narrative fiction through *The Silver Cloud Café*, creating an epistemological bridge between the writer/reader and Mexican American cultural history. Moreover, it serves as a form of cultural critique that incorporates and transcends the "institutionalized" categories of race, class, or gender. Lastly, it furnishes the answer to Teodoro's question regarding the belief in angels, clarifying as well his idea of God:

My God does not grant wishes . . . just look at me. . . . My God is just a holy thing. That's what my God is . . . holy—not religious or sacred—those are man-made things. She is holy. He is a fissure in the bending bones of my childhood. He is day's end in the hot fields, a dipper full of cold water on my head and running down my hunched back as I close my eyes and realize that now I can rest. . . . He is the immeasurable instant when graceful flight transmutes into irreversible plummet. He is the awe and the empathy in the eyes of the crowd. (322-23)

Among the many allusions to the gnostic gospels, one could select Zeferino's understanding of confession (learned during his boyhood from Teodoro) and the omniscient narrator's reference to the early Christian gnostics ("once the skies were crowded with dare-devil gnostics, laughing madly and gyrating between pointed minarets" [55]). In the first instance, Zeferino understood confession as "a device cleverly designed to detect heresies at an early age" (40), and not, as Elaine Pagels explains, "to confess Christ in their faith and in their everyday conduct" (*Gnostic* 96).¹⁰ Differing with most early Christians on the interpretation of Jesus's teachings and, more important, on their views on Christ, the

<https://newprairiepress.org/stcl/vol25/iss1/11>
DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1500

gnostics—mistrustful of any institutionalized religion, and linked by name to “knowledge” (*gnosis*), hence to an esoteric wing of Christianity—soon suffered persecution from within (fellow Christians) more so than from without (Romans). Between the literal reading of Jesus’s parables and the cynicism of disbelief, the gnostics proposed that one

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, “My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.” Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate. . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him in *yourself*. (Pagels, *Gnostic* xix-xx)

Regarding the thematic patterns expressed through “twinning” and the combat myth, these literary devices add to the narrative an intricate textual hierarchy that ranges from the mythic to the existential, as dramatized in the case involving Bambino and Faustino, where one reads more than just a case of revenge: it exhibits a violent homophobia, rationalized by Bambino’s father to hide the memory of Lilly’s rejection. Conversely, Faustino and Teodoro are the “twins” who represent the earthly analogue of the ascending angels and—through the symbolism of their names—of Zeferino’s own intellectual inclinations and his profession as a criminal defense lawyer (first in connection to Faustino, a literary Faust who achieves his “redemption” through Constantine’s love, then like Teodoro, as a “protector of shipwrecked men”). Inquiring into the cultural meaning of *air* and *wind*, Freud states that “it was the movement of the air that provided the prototype of intellectuality, for intellect derives its name from a breath of wind—‘*animus*,’ ‘*spiritus*,’ and the Hebrew ‘*ruach*’” (Freud 114). Consistent with such a discursive construct, from the beginning of *The Silver Cloud Café* one encounters references to “old Zephyrus, whose blue breath smelled of the mistral” (16), to Faustino’s three brothers, “flying along on the California Zephyr, in a shining silver car” (153, 281, 299), and more significantly to Teodoro’s confrontation with Bambino. While hearing of Faustino’s death, Teodoro remembers his friend’s references to the zephyr:

Remember, Teodoro, when we slaved in the fields every day and the slightest gust made us all raise our sweating heads so hopefully? Perhaps it's a kind wind, we would say. Do you remember how we always prayed for wind and shade? Is death a cold gale, Teodoro? Is heaven a sweet norther that has come to dry our brow? (321)

Erasing the limits of a character's name, "Zeferino Del Campo" rises to the level of a cryptonym that combines allusions to the *breath of life*, to the *mind*, to a farmworker's hopes, including the twin-coded allusions to a cardinal point ("the west wind") and to death (from the Greek *zophos*, darkness, west). Since the principle of twinning is deployed consistently throughout *The Silver Cloud Café*, its intertextual memory interconnects myths from the Mediterranean and from Ancient Mexico, where "heavenly twins" are often associated with the rotation of the sun and the moon, the combat myth (e.g., the sibling strife between Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui), and fraternal love (e.g., the Dioscuri, or the trickster twins in the *Popol Vuh*). Commenting on the "heavenly twins" in the Greco-Roman and biblical traditions, Edmund Leach proposes the following:

The mythology of the heavenly twins of Greco-Roman myth (Dioscuri/Gemini) is complex and inconsistent. In the commonest surviving version, they were the sons of Leda by *different fathers* but born on the same day . . . they were eventually both made immortal but spent their days alternately *in heaven and in the underworld* . . . the Dioscuri were, among other things, *the patron saints of sailors in distress*. They were specially invoked in times of storm. (594; my emphasis)

In the midst of his own storm, Father Humberto appears as the metaphorical *twin* and the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Bambino Reyes as noticed in their problematic religiosity, libidinal tendencies, and oppositional relation. With a background as a Cristero soldier, Father Humberto spent more than sixty years in hotels and in bars slowly poisoning himself, carrying a sense of guilt for having killed a schoolteacher during Mexico's Cristero Rebellion (1926-1928). For his crime, he is executed along with his twin brother; having survived the execution, Father Humberto asks God why he has been chosen to live in a silver tower under

the San Francisco sky. The narrator paraphrases an angel's immediate response: "It had been built for a strategic, far-reaching purpose. It was for Bambino. Among other reasons, Humberto had been kept alive for over sixty years past his first death so that he could man the watchtower that had been constructed to look out for Bambino Reyes" (291).

But Father Humberto is more than a watchman: he plans the fateful meeting between Bambino and Teodoro ("The mad priest had purposefully chosen the precise time and the exact place of the rendezvous" [315]). A memorable character whose literary ancestors form a genealogical tree partly planted in Gothic literature, Bambino is unnatural both in his parasitic existence (explained in the parable of the mantle [211-12]), as well as in the metaphysical dimensions of the vindictiveness he inherits—as an original sin—from his uncle Simon Ditto. True to his name, Bambino's uncle becomes an evangelical parody (Simon-Peter) and a "ditto" or exact replica of his twin's fallen nature:

The cloven furies below would stand to applaud this grief, hail it with blue lips lined with white lime. They would raise a coal-and-pitch clamor for revenge in Simon Ditto's ear. Shaking shattered shankbones, they would sing their motley malediction. They would demand that all life be soured for all time, despoiled by the embrace of the irreversible oath of vendetta. (191)

IV

Interpreted retroactively, a distinction can now be made between the novel's encrypted event (e.g., the displaced traces or lost memory of a *murder mystery*, from Pietro Ditto's to that of his son, Bambino Reyes), its cryptograph (the novel's intertextual "corpus"), and its cryptogram (Zeferino's name). In the analysis of the novel's murder mystery I have followed Freud's observation regarding the double meaning of *distortion*—namely "to change the appearance of something," and "to put something in another place, to displace" (Freud 43). This observation led to the study of the narrative's *distorted* structure in its formal arrangement and in terms of its encrypted event. The novel's intertextual memory consisted of three coded subtexts based on works by Dante and José Clemente Orozco, both given a para-

digmatic account of a rise “from hell to paradise” in the Moses story, with its internal organization ranging from the myth of exposure to the hero’s homecoming as the embodiment of the law. Quoting Otto Rank, Freud begins his argument in *Moses and Monotheism* with the basic structural elements in the story of Moses:

As a result of this the new-born child is condemned to death or to *exposure*, usually by the orders of *his father or of someone representing him*; as a rule he is given over to the *water* in a *casket*. He is afterwards rescued by animals or by *humble people* (such as shepherds) and is suckled by a *female animal* or by a *humble woman*. After he has grown up, he rediscovers his aristocratic parents after highly variegated experiences, *takes his revenge on his father*, on the one hand, and is *acknowledged* on the other and achieves greatness and fame. (Freud 11)

This is not the place to analyze how this mythical microtext has been appropriated successfully by Alfredo Vea both in *La Maravilla* and in *The Silver Cloud Café*; nonetheless, suffice it to say that in the latter novel one discovers the activation of the following elements: first of all, the child’s exposure (149), followed by the hero’s “two families” when rescued by humble farmworkers (Teodoro and Faustino); the nourishment received from a humble woman (“Another protector was waiting inside the metal building. . . . She would feed the boy. . . . That night, the boy would name the woman Gum” [226]); furthermore, the hero’s “highly variegated experiences” (e.g., the Vietnam war), and achievement of “greatness and fame” (i.e., professional success). In regards to the *casket*, the association with “coffin” or containment of the hero’s body prior to his *rebirth* takes us directly to the “mystery” surrounding the novel’s crime as well as to Zeferino’s youth:

As he stared at Ted For Short, Zeferino Del Campo, for the first time, began to realize consciously that there had always been a mystery in his life, *a locked room sealed off since childhood*. He had always been aware of that forbidden room, but something had kept him from focusing on it, from prying that door open and peering inside. (87; my emphasis)

Analyzed through the mediation of the Moses story, Zeferino's homecoming does not point to an *ethnic* revival, but to the birth of an *ethical* subject, engraved in the popular memory as a "falling" or descending bearded figure with the law sculpted by celestial fire on stone tablets. A figural association between Moses and Zeferino would thus introduce judicial matters into our interpretation: Zeferino argues that a human being's first and second thoughts belong to the devil and to God, respectively; as a criminal defense attorney, he asks the jury for the latter ("reason untainted by prejudice"), but secretly, he asks:

for the third thought: for reason tinged by a different quality; moderated by feeling for both the victim and the defendant. . . . "A defense lawyer," he began again, but with more calm, "has to cultivate within himself *the ability to reverse the order of those thoughts*. Only when the case is over may he, himself, indulge in first thoughts." (208-09; my emphasis)

For the moment, the point to consider is that the novel's cryptograph contains its *recent* historical analogue in the history of California's seasonal workers of the late 1950's, that is to say, during the closing years of the *bracero* program which altogether lasted 22 years (1942-1964). In this Moses subtext, with "heart-sick Hebrews brought into Egypt to toil beneath the sun" (1), the young César Chávez appears on the scene, standing shy and smiling next to Faustino (117); talking about a farmworker's union "that crossed all racial lines" (134); or attending a wedding—Radiant Ruby's and Teodoro's ("It was a wedding in reverse" [286]). At this critical juncture, a retroactive analysis would produce the novel's multi-leveled memory:

The encrypted event: An exposure, a murder: *a character's memory*
 The cryptonym: Zeferino Del Campo ("spirit of the field"): *a generational memory*
 The cryptograph: The Story of Moses: *an intertextual memory*.

From these mnemonic layers, the bottom two are central features in Chicano cultural history (first of all, the 1960s and the "conscience-raising" activism; secondly, the notion of "leading" one's people out of bondage and into the Promised Land, etc.);

the topmost, in spite of its non-linear development, functions as a major plot line in the narrative, thus resolving the *fictional* tension between “textual” and “historical” correspondences. As in previous cases involving hierarchical levels, our analysis must proceed vertically to unify all layers into a meaningful mnemonic configuration. Viewed as such, the repressed memory strata represent the limits or frontiers of a geopolitical allegory through which a national destiny can be read and interpreted. Analyzed in this light, the novel brings back to memory the nexus between a culture of bachelors (e.g., Filipinos) and anti-miscegenation laws; the confiscation of property belonging to Japanese Americans during World War II (“those idiotic Ditto brothers . . . both members in good standing of the growers association, and, coincidentally, first in line to claim this land” [146]), and the hostile U.S. anti-immigrant attitudes during the 1990s.

The Silver Cloud Café produces a counter-narrative to an American history known for its aggressive territorial expansionism and selective discrimination. Clearly, such global phenomenon serves only to point to a national legacy that is at the core of Chicano history, thereby manifesting the magnitude of the latter’s “universality” or paradigmatic character. Véa’s novel, as a result, offers the objective preconditions of current U.S. anti-immigrant politics in an imperial history that, at this point in our reading, can be identified as the structural contradiction in American democracy. Faithful to the novel’s initial affirmation that the immigrant’s vision of America is “always the truest,” the novel reaches its conclusion with the following observation made by Teodoro:

Everything that I was, was given to me by my Islands. Here in America, I was nothing . . . less than nothing. What a surprise it was for me when I found out that people here deny their past. Each person here believes that he has succeeded on his own, without help from anyone. Everyone knows that even the strongest man rides on his grandmother’s back. After years I realized the answer: If you don’t share a past or a culture, you don’t have to share your labor or your earnings or your future. (337)

Alfredo Véa has chosen the word as a weapon; indeed, he has come to us fully armed and amazingly mature as a writer. Since

The Silver Cloud Café forms part of a narrative trilogy, our present reading must remain incomplete and provisional. A more detailed analysis would have to advance on at least four fronts: first of all, with the construction of an analytical model that would comprehend the question of *unity* in a writer's narrative corpus (i.e., an analysis that would contain in its scope *La Maravilla*, *The Silver Cloud Café*, and *Gods Go Begging*, thus grasping Alberto, Zeferino, and Jesse Pasadoble as the three names of the same "fictional" character); secondly, the "remapping" of the borders of Chicano literature (hence the redefinition of its textual *unity*), and the expansion of its intertextual memory, no longer limited to folklore or to the "ethnic" in us; thirdly, an analysis of Alfredo Véa's rhetorical language, and of problems related to cultural translation and to the *naming of the New* (as we read in *La Maravilla*: the Yaqui language "had no words and no thoughts to deal with a fierce daughter in a Pontiac car and three sons from three fathers" [31]); and, lastly—now at the level of a writer's own *unity*, hence interpreting works as personal *testimonios*—one could consider the question of how the fictional narrative allows for the autobiographical to appear under the guise of myth, as anecdotal content (e.g., Alberto's, Zeferino's, and Jesse's Vietnam war experiences), or as a character's rite of passage.

From its beginnings, the Chicano novel has privileged personal experience as the background and truth-content of fiction, thus making available a trajectory of novels that could be read as hermetic autobiographies, from José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959) and Rudolfo Anaya's narrative trilogy (*Bless Me, Ultima*, *Heart of Aztlán*, and *Tortuga*, 1972-1979), to a magisterial example in the Chicano autobiographical novel: Eliud Martínez' *Voice-Haunted Journey* (1990), where the borders of the self, fiction, and autobiographical truth are erased and redrawn with mirth and meaningful artifice. In a similar vein, Véa's fictional narrative is densely textured with autobiographical features, ultimately recovering a national history and a personal past that animate the writer as well as his literary corpus.

Notes

1. For instance, in a recent interview Vea affirms: “You have to dissent from a normal way of speaking and thinking and from other art. When you think that you have that all right, you have to dissent from that thought. You have to break your own mold over and over again. You have to leap out of the mundane.” See Porter 82.

2. Although Zeferino’s *recovered* memory could be read as a resolution of a traumatic early experience—or, collectively, as an allegory of an *ethnic* historical appropriation, therefore its figural gravitation from periphery to center, or from branch to trunk—Zeferino’s remembrance could be compared to a similar situation in Proust’s narrative; as Jameson observes, his “great theme” might not be memory, but “our incapacity to experience things ‘for the first time’; the possibility of genuine experience (*Erfahrung*) only the second time round (by writing rather than memory)” (Jameson 83 n. 10). This relation between writing and memory appears in Radiant Ruby (in her attempts to identify her unknown mother) through the association between spoken language and memory: “‘For memories, you need words,’ she would say aloud. ‘You need to tell a thing and have it heard’ ” (176).

3. In his study of biblical discourse and structural relations between the Old and New Testaments, Edmund Leach makes an observation regarding the languages used to describe the profane and the heavenly worlds: “In this Other World *everything happens in reverse*. The heavenly bread falls from the sky like rain; the heavenly water does not fall like rain but emerges from a rock. . . . Thus specified, the Wilderness, the Other World of things sacred, is in every respect the *exact converse* of the profane world that is familiar to ordinary people conducting their ordinary secular affairs” (587; emphasis added). As we shall observe later, Vea’s conception of writing—to take a leap *out of the mundane*—has firm *secular* correlations with such views.

4. A similar “war” symbolism and apocalyptic imagery are found in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), rhetorical features that I study in my 1990 article.

5. Among the Nag Hammadi texts, *The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* instructs its readers how to ascend to higher knowledge: “I see! . . . I see the one that moves me from pure forgetfulness. . . . And I myself see the same vision in you. I see the eighth and the souls that are in it and the angels singing a hymn to the ninth and its powers . . . I pray

to the end of the universe and the beginning of the beginning" (quoted in Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* 137).

6. The study of Véa's energetic incorporation of *The Divine Comedy* as a paradigmatic subtext in *The Silver Cloud Café* would take us far beyond the limits of the present analysis. However, the "problems" of reading that Véa's narrative proposes can be recognized for what they are when we discover the extent of his appropriation of major texts, hence the challenge to our reading habits. For striking analogies with Véa's work, see Erich Auerbach's study of Dante in regards to the following: Dante's mingling of styles (the elevated and low style [185]), the combination of tragedy and comedy in one work (186), *The Divine Comedy's* contrapuntal structure (178), and the figural-vertical interpretation required by providential history (74). As I shall comment presently, these literary appropriations, more so than mere aesthetic ornament, serve as the ground for Véa's critique of our historical era.

7. Father Humberto's taxi-dance hall in Mexico was known as *El Infierno* (163) and was, by extension, the analogue of Stockton's three-leveled *House of Blue Heels*, containing the Rose Room Taxi-Dance Hall, the brothel known as the Flip-Flop, and the attic where Father Humberto made his dwelling atop the nightly lusts of the flesh. The migratory pattern of Father Humberto's properties or dwelling places thus suggests, on a metaphysical level, Dante's celestial hierarchy, with *The Silver Cloud Café* representing Father Humberto's "journey" from sin and repentance to beatific vision.

8. See the analysis of Orozco's art by Justino Fernández, the main source for my understanding of Orozco's politics and muralist art, particularly as both find expression in *El hombre en su hoguera*. Fernández's analysis of this mural—in the context of the other paintings found in what is presently the *Instituto Cabañas*—reveals its "encrypted event," now associated with the Conquest of America by Spain (532), and, on yet another level of meaning, the history of humanity; in the staggered levels of this symbolic universe, *El hombre en su hoguera* embodies both the zenith and the meaning of life: "La figura ígnea central, que expresa la verdad última: existir, de un modo u otro, es existir quemándose, es anhelo de realización consumiéndose, es ansia de elevación y es limitación y dolor, en donde surge el sentido trágico de la existencia y la belleza trágica suprema expresada por el artista" "The central igneous figure expresses the ultimate truth: to exist is, one way or another, to exist in flames; it is a longing to find fulfillment in self-immolation;

an anxiety of transcendence along with a limitation and pain that generate the tragic sense of one's existence and the tragic and supreme beauty expressed by the artist' (Fernández 533).

9. In the twelfth and concluding chapter, Teodoro asks a question that, although meant for Zeferino, could be interpreted as a reader's "test" after having read the novel; Teodoro asks, "after all your education, after all this time, after all that you've seen and remembered, do you really believe in angels?" (338). This question is preceded by a reference to the "crazy" religiosity of his Philippino *tios* ("uncles") and, by extension, his Mexican *tíos* as well. In spite of its apparently unanswered condition, the yes/no choices are cancelled by virtue of the question's limited range (crazy Catholicism or modern disbelief) but, more importantly, because the answer was given in a previous passage ("angels exist simply because we believe in them! Tonight, let us all believe in everything that is fine and true...without benefit of a safety net" [300]). As witnessed in the novel, the literal-minded approach to Christianity's mysteries (e.g., the actual crucifixion of boys like Teodoro and Bambino in Baguio; the *Cristero* Rebellion in Mexico during the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles, etc.) and a modern nihilism can hardly produce, when considered individually or collectively, a *gnostic* answer. The allusion to Jesus's parable of the net (Matt. 13:47-50) raises the meaning of Teodoro's question to another level, reminding us that the same reference is made in other passages (to Zeferino, "you will feel like you are snared in one of heaven's nets" [197], and—immediately after Faustino's death—"Ensnared by unseen hands, his spirit was carried aloft in hourless time to a distance neither close nor far" [298]). The image of a net *snaring* or catching a soul is explained by Edmund Leach in the context of Jesus's parable: "Those who are caught in the net are the elect, who are saved; those who are not caught are the damned" (595). Clearly, Teodoro's question, much like a parable, requires a reading that takes us beyond its literal level; but the fact remains that, because the judicial system does not believe in angels, Bambino's crime is never resolved. Of course, the mystery of Bambino's "murder" is resolved by the reader; as our reading nears the novel's conclusion, we approach it with third thoughts, remembering the "good" and the "evil" characters with equal interest.

10. The social contradictions that emerge when faith and everyday conduct part ways—and the resulting impact on children—constitute a central reflection in Chicano narrative, as found in *Pocho* (1959), by José Antonio Villarreal, in *y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), by Tomás

Rivera, in *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), by Rudolfo Anaya, and, among recent novels, in *First Confession* (1991), by Montserrat Fontes.

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