PART ONE

POLITICS, POETICS, AND THE RESIDUAL PRECURSORS, 1848–1958

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche.

Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*

Corrido, the Mexicans call their narrative folk songs, especially those of epic themes, taking the name from *correr*, which means "to run" or "to flow," for the *corrido* tells a story simply and swiftly, without embellishments.

Américo Paredes,
With His Pistol in His Hand

No hay mejor cosa que un buen corrido. [There is nothing better than a good corrido.]

My father (all the time)

I

Borders, Bullets, and Ballads

The Social Making of a Master Poem

In 1915, as European imperialist powers fought their bloody Great War, and two years before the Bolshevik uprising in Russia, both war and revolution raged in Mexico and briefly on the northern side of the Mexico–United States border. During the initial phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910 to 1911), various allied revolutionary groups had deposed the autocratic, United States–supported dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. However, this initial unity fragmented when the more conservative groups in the coalition took power but failed to demonstrate a clear commitment to the speedy realization of the Revolution's ideals, principally serious land redistribution. The more liberal and populist forces of leaders such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, in alliance, opposed this betrayal and the civil war continued. In April 1915, in "the most famous military engagement of the Revolution—the battle of Celaya," the army of general Alvaro Obregón, in the service of the conservative President Venustiano Carranza, defeated the populist forces of Francisco Villa in a ferocious encounter that presaged the ultimate demise of Villa and Zapata (Meyer and Sherman 1979:539).[1] The Wilson administration's recognition of the Carranza government that same year also signaled the eventual triumph of conservative capitalist rule in Mexico and the continuing impoverishment of the Mexican masses, albeit in the guise of an official rhetoric of "institutional" revolution (Cockcroft 1983:99–116).

The pivotal Battle of Celaya was witnessed in part by a wealthy American adventurer, man of letters, and world traveler, Edward Larocque Tinker, who accompanied Villa's troops as a civilian observer. On the evening following the battle, as he "wandered along the boxcars on which the troops were quartered on the roofs," he heard "singing and the strumming of stringed instruments." Seeking the source of this music, he

> came into the light of a campfire around which a crowd of Villa's ragged soldiers were gathered with their *soldaderas*—those amazing Amazons

> who cooked for their men, and, with pots and pans, and often a baby on their backs, kept up with the regiments on gruelling marches; or, when need arose, snatched a rifle from a corpse and fought as fiercely as any male. This strange motley crowd, most of them showing strong strains of Aztec, was listening in the moonlight like fascinated children to the singing of three men. (1961:7)

As he listened "to the assonance of their voices," Tinker reports,

> I too was fascinated and thought they sang some old folk tale. As verse after verse, however, took the same melodic pattern I suddenly realized that this was no ancient epic, but a fresh minted account of the battle of the day before. . . . It was a *corrido*—hot from the oven of their vivid memory of the struggle between Villa and Obregón—the first one I had ever heard. (1961:7)

The context of social conflict; singing in verse with the "same melodic pattern"; a narrated account of a specific powerful incident; male performers and a predominantly male audience (we shall attend to the presence of women later)—all of these enter into Tinker's general but likely accurate account of his first corrido performance. In 1943, when he returned to Mexico "to lecture on North American idealistic literature" at the National University, he "got a chance to study the subject" and also realized that, while "no ancient epic" singers, the corrido performers he had seen,

> like the payadores of Argentina and Uruguay, were, in almost every essential, the lineal descendants of the troubadours who performed at the Court of Eleanore of Aquitaine in the middle of the 12th century, and that their songs were the Creole counterpart of the early Spanish *romances,* those Iberian *chansons de geste* in which countless medieval bards sang the famous exploits of Hispanic knights to the accompaniment of the *lira mendicoram—romances* which must have come to America with the Conquistadores. (1961:7–8)

In this chapter I shall examine Tinker's definition of the corrido in much greater detail and set out its relationship to the social history of its most active period. It must be clear from the outset that I am not discussing all corridos but only the epic heroic corrido of greater Mexico. We will see how this song narrative with its long heritage, compelling artistry, and its implication in social conflict became a master precursor poem for at least two generations of male Mexican-descent poets in the United States. For although the corrido had a very limited

influence on writers in Mexico (Paredes 1958a:102), it exerted a far more creative influence on Mexican-American writers. It was in the Mexican North and in the U.S. Southwest (hereafter, the Border) with their intimate ties of geography, population, and culture that the Mexican corrido flowered. In that same spring of 1915, as Obregón's machine guns and artillery were cutting down Villa's barbed-wire-entangled infantry like so many British at the Somme, the Texas rural police known as the Texas Rangers, supported by U.S. cavalry, were ruthlessly suppressing an armed rebellion of Mexican-Americans protesting Anglo-American authority in south Texas (Paredes 1958b:25–27; Harris and Sadler 1978; Montejano 1987:117–28). Around campfires in south Texas and in northern Mexico, where the rebels took refuge, they strummed guitars and sang of their violent encounters with the hated *gringos* (Paredes 1976:32–34). They sang in the same verse forms and recurring melodic patterns used by Villa's *norteño* (northern) soldiers, who at that moment were fighting against U.S.-supported domination a few hundred miles south of the border at Celaya.

Before explaining how a medieval poetic form introduced into southern Mexico by the Spanish conquistadors became a distinctive and artistically powerful master cultural poetics of the northern Border, I want to expand and specify Tinker's description of the corrido.

THE GREATER MEXICAN CORRIDO: AN EXPANDED DEFINITION

Even allowing for the literary license often taken by Anglo-American writers on Mexico (Robinson 1977), it is not difficult to appreciate why the Mexican corridos "fascinated" both Villa's "ragged soldiers" and the urbane, cosmopolitan Professor Tinker. But one must correct Tinker's impression that the corrido is a direct, relatively unchanged descendant of the Spanish romance introduced into Mexico with the Conquest. For the moment, let us note the key differences, which I will historicize later in this chapter. Following Mendoza (1954), Geijerstam (1976:50–51) lists these important differences between the older Spanish romance and the later corrido:

1. The romance has lines of seven or eight syllables; corridos tend to have eight, but may have up to twenty syllables per line. (This is particularly the case with historical corridos from the state of Guerrero.)

2. The romance consists mainly of a nonstrophic series of lines, assonantic, with simple rhymes (*monorrimos*) on lines with an even number; the corrido is strophic, with four or six lines in each verse, and has different types of rhyme.
3. The romance is epic, novelistic, and *morisco,* that is, it deals with fiestas, tournaments, love affairs, and so forth. The corrido expands these themes, becoming a kind of local news service.
4. In musical terms, the romance is "serious," modal, and melodically restrained, while the corrido is "overflowing," lyrical, and of wider melodic range, though it retains the metric and rhythmic characteristics of its Spanish ancestor.
5. The romance usually consists of a dialogue between two principals; in contrast, the corrido is a narrative usually in the first or third person, with the troubadour acting as the (hypothetical) witness of the event described.

Contemporary scholars have refined these observations. Almost all scholars agree that the corrido is a male narrative folk song of greater Mexico composed in octosyllabic quatrains and sung to a tune in ternary rhythm and in 3/4 or 6/8 time. The quatrains are structured in an *abcb* rhyme scheme with no fixed number of stanzas for any given song or performance. The opening stanza usually sets the scene, time, and central issue of the narrated events and may, on occasion, carry a request from singer to audience for permission to begin the song. Often the closing stanza offers an overall comment on the narrated events and may also announce that the ballad has ended and express a farewell from the singer to the audience (McDowell 1981; Mendoza 1939, 1954; Paredes 1958b, 1963, 1976; Simmons 1957). Finally, corridos, in the words of their best younger scholar, "focus on events of particular consequence to the *corrido* community," on "events of immediate significance" that produce a "heightened awareness of mutual values and orientations" (McDowell 1981:46). The variations are sometimes considerable, but all scholars posit this basic corrido type.

Tinker heard an early and immediate corrido about the monumental battle at Celaya. Although he provides no text, most likely the ballad he heard resembled the version collected by Vicente T. Mendoza (1954). The first and last stanzas are (the translations are my own):

De Los Combates de Celaya

En mil novecientos quince
Jueves Santo en la mañana
salió Villa de Torreón
a combatir a Celaya
. . . . . .

Ya no le temo al cañón
ni tampoco a la metralla
aquí da fin el corrido
del combate de Celaya
(Mendoza 1954:53–56)

Of the Battles of Celaya

In nineteen hundred and fifteen
On a Holy Thursday morning
Villa left from Torreon
To do battle at Celaya
. . . . . .
I no longer fear the cannon
Nor the machine gun do I fear
and here ends the corrido
Of the battle at Celaya.

We may begin by noting the poem's predominantly octosyllabic lines—"En *mil* nove*cien*tos *quin*ce"—with syllabic stresses on two, five, and seven. From the outset the folk poet has a traditional obligation inherited from the Spanish romance to shape his lines within this rhythmic constraint, especially if we assume that the poem may also be read. There is some validity to this latter assumption, as we shall see.

However, the socially and artistically optimum mode for the corrido is as a sung poem, and in this mode a musical rhythm overrides the poetic meter. As Paredes (1958b:208) and McDowell (1981:65–70) both note, as song, the corrido imposes an additional artistic obligation upon the corridista (the composer-singer): to sing to a rhythm that in all likelihood is not consonant with the meter. To use their own shared example, let us consider the two opening lines from "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" (The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez):

En el condado del Carmen
Miren lo que ha sucedido

In the country of El Carmen
Look what has happened

If read as poetry, these lines would be stressed on the first, fourth, and seventh syllables: *En* el con*da*do del *Car*men. But when sung, the lines would have a very strong stress on the second, rather than the first, syllable of each line. When repeated in each line of the ballad, this musical syncopation, which alters the poetic meter, produces a discernible aesthetic effect. The "counterpointing of rhythms," Paredes

explains, and the ending of the second line of each quatrain on "the major chord formed on the subdominant," and "high register singing," all add "a great deal of vigor, almost defiant vigor, to the delivery of the *corrido* when it is sung by a good singer" (1958b:209). Already at the level of rhythm, the artistic manipulation of what McDowell calls "two autonomous systems, the poetic and the musical" constitutes the fundamental basis of a strong poem (1981:70).

A contrapuntal relationship is also articulated by the contrast between the corrido's stable rhyme scheme and its stanzaic novelty. In each stanza the second and fourth lines "must be controlled for rhyme or assonance" (McDowell 1981:56). McDowell elaborates on this artistic challenge: "From the composer's point of view, the critical moment in this structural unit are those key words at the end of lines 2 and 4. . . . Spanish, with its tendency to alternate vowels and consonants and even to delete certain unstressed consonants, contains many words which fortuitously end with the same pair of final vowels" (1981:57). As McDowell emphasizes, "it is the task of the *corridista* to exploit these congruences in tailoring his stanzas, while maintaining the semantic integrity of the *corrido*" (1981:57).

However, even as the corridista is maintaining the rhythmic patterns and rhyme scheme, he is also constructing a chain of stanzas in which, according to corrido tradition, there is rarely a repetition of stanzas and there is no refrain. That is, "the content of each successive stanza is new" (McDowell 1981:56), creating the rapidly changing imagistic scenery of the corrido (Paredes 1958b:185). Thus, in the first stanza of the Celaya corrido we imagine Villa, the protagonist, setting out from Torreón to do battle; in the second stanza, we find ourselves riding a troop train, and we are also introduced to General Obregón, Villa's antagonist.

Corre, corre, maquinita
no me dejes ni un vagón
nos vamos para Celaya
a combatir a Obregón.
(Mendoza 1954:53)

Run, run, little train
Leave no cars behind
We are going to Celaya
To do battle with Obregón.

The imagistic and scenic novelty of each stanza is artistically counterpointed to the recurrent rhyme and rhythm. (Perhaps it was something

like this for Francisco Villa's peasant soldiers riding in their troop trains. They must have watched the changing scenes of the landscape from northern Coahuila to south-central Guanajuato even as they heard the repetitive rhythm of the train carrying them down the tracks to their destiny at Celaya.)

Earlier, I spoke of the corrido as a narrative folk song, yet it is not a wholly narrativized discourse in the strictest sense. Rather, as McDowell points out, the general "narrative" of the corrido is really a structure of alternations. The corrido often alternates between actually narrated (chronologically linear) segments, in which an iconic account of events is presented, and other segments that constitute "the emotional kernel of the *corrido*," verses that "dramatize that most dramatic of human involvements, the face-to-face interaction." The corrido may "expand the greater portion of its energy in presenting dialogue," and when it does so, iconicity is transcended and an "experiential substratum" appears in the ballad with a "relation of identity . . . presumed to obtain between the words spoken in the experiential substratum and the words sung by the *corridista*" (McDowell 1981:47).

"El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" illustrates the point. At one instant in his flight, Cortez is surrounded by lawmen who have thrown up a corral around him. Under intense gunfire, he jumps the corral, kills a second sheriff and escapes with parting shots from his gun and his lips.

> Allá por El Encinal
> según lo que aquí se dice
> les formaron un Corral
> y les mató otro cherife.
>
> Over by Encinal
> According to what we hear
> They made him a Corral
> And he killed another sheriff.

In the next stanza, Cortez speaks in quietly boasting metaphors:

> Decía Gregorio Cortez
> echando muchos balazos
> —Me he escapado de aguaceros,
> contimás de nublinazos.
> (Paredes 1958b:156)
>
> Then said Gregorio Cortez
> Shooting out a lot of bullets
> "I have weathered thunderstorms;
> This little mist doesn't bother me."

For McDowell, such a scene is the key to the corrido's artistic power, for it permits a "narrative discourse . . . punctuated by flashes of identification between the narrative and the experiential substratum" (1981: 48); while the corrido "does not favor poetic conceit in its presentation of narrative detail . . . the portions of reported speech . . . provide the *corridista* with ample scope to wax poetic" (1981:61).

Marked and traditional poetic language emerges in the form of ritualized and metaphorical boasts and insults by the central protagonist of the ballad. That Gregorio Cortez uses metaphoric language to compare the lawmen's furious shooting to a "little mist" also reinforces the image of the hero as an accomplished individual who can ride, shoot, and speak, often in "complex and subtle poetic conceits native to the oral tradition of his community." In the final analysis, of course, we are really speaking of the folk poet's ability to be an "accomplished man of words" (McDowell 1981:64).

While being attentive to all these artistic obligations, the folk poet must also respond to certain demands created by his relationship to his community, and these demands also shape his poem. Of particular interest here is what McDowell calls the "reflexive" character of the corrido manifested in its traditional opening and closing stanzas, which place the principal narrative in a metanarrative frame. The opening scene-setting stanza and the formally announced closing and farewell at the end enable the song to refer to itself, to "draw attention to the occasion of performance rather than to the occasion of narrative action" (McDowell 1981:48). Here one might quarrel a bit with McDowell, though. It is not clear, for example, why the opening stanza of the Celaya corrido—describing Villa setting out from Torreón—is not part of the "occasion of narrative action" but rather a reference to the "occasion of performance." Nonetheless, this opening stanza is distinct from those that follow, in that the latter put the audience immediately and imagistically into the movement and din of battle, which is, after all, the central concern of the corrido. In its imagistically unfocused, somewhat more abstract language, the first stanza does have something of a metanarrative quality. The reflexive quality of the final stanza is, in contrast, transparent: for the first and only time the singer at Celaya refers to himself in the first person, implicates himself in the battle, and clearly informs his audience that his song is ended.

Such reflexivity situates the song in an intimate relationship to the audience and, by extension, to society. Whatever the considerable

achievement of the individual folk poet, the song also flows from the social and back to it again. This useful fiction, that society is also the author of the song, is also upheld by another artistic convention. While we clearly have the appearance, albeit brief, of the first person in the final stanza of the Celaya corrido, most corridos embrace "the literary fiction of an understood observer, who encases his observations in the impersonal third-person . . . the typical case involves an impersonal authorial voice, present but not implicated in the events it depicts" (McDowell 1981:46). The effacement of the author into the impersonal third person precludes the audience from indulging in any easy personal identification with any figure in the poem. Rather, one tends to identify with the public social events depicted and the cultural actions that produce them. Further, the effacement of the corridista reinforces the social, collective nature of the corrido. While most corridos are the work of a single author, any personal point of view manifested in the ballad seems to represent a shared perspective. "Above all," Simmons posits, the composer "must identify himself with the *pueblo* and take care that the opinions he expresses are acceptable to the *pueblo*" (1957:36).

As to the performance itself, the optimum manner for experiencing the corrido as social art is in a face-to-face performance, such as that reported by Tinker. Following Paredes (1976), McDowell notes three traditional principal occasions for the singing of corridos: the solitary setting (when riding the range alone on horseback, for example); the familial context, with both sexes and different ages present; and the all-male group setting. The first is, by definition, not a social performance, while the second makes for a limited repertoire and a subdued rendition (violent corridos might be excluded or censored, for example). The all-male setting, however, places no such limits on the fullest display of the corridista's competence. Both Paredes and McDowell situate such performances in a cantina, or barroom, but they also take place today during men-only barbecues in south Texas. It is in these all-male settings that the full range of corrido aesthetics is on display, both the talents of the singer-composer as well as the skills of the audience, their ability to judge and comment on the form and content of the ballads (McDowell 1981:71).

Today, corridos are also transmitted through the printed page, films, records, and oral recitation without music. But the all-male face-to-face performance still dominates the perception and definition of the

corrido, and it too is an ideological act in its own right. Indeed, we must pursue the theme of masculinity a bit further as we now examine the propositional content—the heroic world—of the corrido.

THE HEROIC WORLD OF THE CORRIDO

The corrido, we noted earlier, focuses on events that are of particular significance to the corridista's community and that capture and articulate this community's values and orientations. Among such classes of events—natural disasters, the election of officials, the untimely death of a child—one theme seems to have struck a special resonance: confrontation, violent confrontation, between individual men who often represent larger social causes but just as often are concerned with their personal honor. In neither case should the issue be petty or small, and in some corridos both concerns are intertwined:

> The fearless man of action, the capacity to die honorably—these are themes characteristic of a heroic world view and the world view of the *corrido* is decidedly heroic. Part of the propositional intent of the *corrido* is to stipulate that a man *should* die honorably, *should* confront death fearlessly.
>
> The honorable course of action is highlighted by presentation of its opposite, the man who disgraces himself by flinching at impending death. (McDowell 1981:53)

At the height of the battle of Celaya, his soldiers falling around him, rather than retreat, Villa redoubles his courage, according to his corridista:

> Dice Don Francisco Villa:
> —De nuevo voy a atacar,
> me han matado mucha gente,
> su sangre voy a vengar.
> (Mendoza 1954:55)

> Don Francisco Villa says:
> —I will attack again
> They have killed many of my people
> Their blood I will avenge.

In contrast, as the composer of the ballad of Gregorio Cortez tells us, the Anglos chasing Cortez knew only fear:

Venían los americanos
más blancos que una paloma
de miedo que le tenían
a Cortez y su pistola

The Americans were coming
They were whiter than a dove
From the fear that they had
Of Cortez and his pistol

Cortez then speaks:

Decía Gregorio Cortez
Con su pistola en la mano:
—No corran, rinches cobardes
con un solo Mexicano.
(Paredes 1958b:156)

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
With his pistol in his hand:
—Don't run, you cowardly rangers,
From just one Mexican.

It is this image of the fearless man defending his right with his pistol in hand that defines the male heroic world of the corrido. To the extent that his personal sense of honor and right are congruent with larger social values and conflicts that concern the entire community, his heroic posture assumes an even more intense social signification. If this latter point is correct, we can begin to understand why the corrido flourished along the Border from the mid-nineteenth century and then declined after 1930.

THE SOCIOHISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE HEROIC CORRIDO

Most scholars of the genre agree that corrido-like songs have been composed in Mexico since the Conquest. There is also total agreement on the corrido's general formal and thematic indebtedness to the Spanish romance, although significant differences argue decisively for the corrido's distinctiveness as a genre, as already noted. Therefore, most scholars take their cue from Mexico's leading authority on the history of the corrido and agree that "in its crystallized form, such as we know it today" the Mexican corrido is "relatively modern" (Mendoza

1954:xiii), that is, a product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially of the intense social change occasioned by the Mexican Revolution. Simmons offers a respected dissenting note and argues that much earlier corrido-like songs are found throughout Latin America, although he also concludes that the corrido "finally evolved or solidified into its modern or definitive form during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century" (1963:1). Mendoza locates the geographical origins of the corrido in southern Michoacán, in deep southwestern Mexico. From there, he believes, it traveled into the northern part of the country, where, he notes, it is also very strong (Mendoza 1939:152–53).

In 1958, however, in conjunction with the publication of his *With His Pistol in His Hand*, Américo Paredes, an American scholar of Mexican descent, suggested a significantly different theory for the historical and geographical origins of the Mexican heroic ballad. In "The Mexican *Corrido*: Its Rise and Fall" (1958a), Paredes puts forth a persuasive and undogmatic case for locating the corrido's temporal origins in the mid-nineteenth century and its geographical origins in southern Texas, where the Rio Grande meets the Gulf of Mexico, an area Paredes calls the Lower Border.

Paredes cautiously and prudently begins to make his argument by noting the inability of scholars to locate a distinctive ballad tradition within Mexico prior to the period of the Revolution. While there are earlier scattered balladlike songs throughout Mexico, none of these are clearly heroic ballads, nor do they constitute a ballad tradition, that is, a group of ballads enduring over time and expressing a focused collective consciousness (1963:233). But, Paredes argues, such a balladry was in existence in the Lower Border at least since, but probably not before, the mid-nineteenth century, long antedating Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship and the first stirrings of revolution in national Mexico. Recently, Luis Leal has affirmed Paredes's thesis in his own work on the border corrido "Leandro Rivera" (1987).

It is at this juncture that we can begin to historicize the differences noted earlier between the Spanish romance and the Mexican corrido. In a phrase, the period's intense social change seems to have produced a condensing, grounded effect on the aesthetics of the romance. The generally looser form of the nonstrophic, metrically diverse romance now becomes strophic, with a regular meter and a more complicated rhyme. The " 'serious,' modal and melodically restrained" music of the

romance now becomes the " 'overflowing,' lyrical" energy of the corrido, as though its wider melodic range were musically equipping it to respond to a socially energetic moment. We may also historicize the shift in authorial voice between these two forms. The Spanish romance has a wholly detached, almost silent narrator whose main focus is delineating dialogue between two principals, while the corrido is "a narrative usually in the first or third person, with the troubadour acting as the hypothetical witness of the event described" (Geijerstam 1976:51). This shift to the witnessed event would seem consistent with the need to concretely ground and legitimize the corrido as an ideological instrument in the context of sharp social conflict. And this same sharp sense of conflict would occasion the need for a more direct narrative delineation of events rather than the indirect emergence of the story through dialogue.

Finally, we note a thematic shift from the epic, novelistic Spanish romance, which deals with "fiestas, tournaments, love affairs, and so forth," to what Geijerstam, after Mendoza, believes is an expansion of these themes in the corrido. Geijerstam is only partially correct here, for although corridos on a wide variety of subjects do begin to appear, in the manner of the Spanish romance, nonetheless, the heroic corrido with its thematic of socially significant male confrontation becomes the best known and most popular. We may say that even as the genre expands, it also contracts, with the best-known corridos fixed, as Paredes says, on "one theme . . . conflict; [on] one concept of the hero, the man fighting for his right with his pistol in his hand" (1958b:149).[2]

For most of greater Mexico, the Revolution provided the intense social conditions required for the crystallization of the heroic corrido. But Mexico had undergone at least three major social crises: the war of independence from Spain (1810–1821), the invasions of the U.S. army in the 1840s, and the French occupation in the 1860s. Why did these crises not produce a definitive heroic balladry? And what conditions prevailed along the Lower Border during this same period that did? Paredes does not explicitly answer the first of these questions, but suggests an answer in his discussion of the second.

For Paredes, at least two general social conditions are prerequisite to the emergence of a heroic balladry. First, there must be present a community with a general tradition of balladry, scattered and uncrystallized as the tradition may be. Second, this community must find itself in a fairly sharp adversarial relationship with other groupings in the