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Beyond the Mind's Mirage: Tales by Joaquin and Cordero-Fernando

LEONARD CASPER

Miguel Bernad, S.J., gave his 1968 collection of essays about the effect of various terrain features on the Philippine imagination the title of *History Against the Landscape*. That basic concept – the mindscape – can be expanded, if we admit that perception always provides simultaneous planes of reality, so that time appears as extended space rather than as motion. The world of the senses becomes a transparency through which we have access to visionary projections, in an act not of dematerialization but of transubstantiation.

NICK JOAQUIN

In Nick Joaquin's tales reassembled in *Tropical Gothic* (1972), time, already spatialized, is further attenuated until all history coexists. Both in his essays and in his fiction, Joaquin has proven himself to be equally skilled as a reporter of the postwar decades and as ethnohistorian of previous centuries. But more in his fiction than in his essays, he has gone beyond the exactitude of detailed record to possible revelation.

If history is presented conventionally in the essays as a linear series grounded in chronology and causality, in his fiction the past seems everpresent even though itself subject to change in the ongoing process of future-becoming-present. The mind retains what was just seen as continuous and contemporary with what the moving eye is only now scanning. The *passage* of time is the great illusion. A writer like Joaquin has merely to stop time through simultaneity, and *he* will be acclaimed as a master magician.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, timelessness is conveyed by such devices as the convergence of several generations onstage,

with their various versions of a single painting (itself linking, while separating, father and son) and Bitoy's presence as both spokesman for and participant in the events being (re) lived. In *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* timelessness is implicit in the central motif of multiple origins, the confrontation/identification scene between young Connie Escobar and the elder Monson, and the seasons seen as mandala symbols and circumferences circling an immovable center. Among the *Tropical Gothic* tales this layered effect, of simultaneity superseding continuity, is conveyed with similar variety. There is the mixture of supernatural and documentary materials in "Legend of the Dying Wanton," "Doña Jeronima," and "The Mass of St. Sylvester." Each of these is told with the rich simplicity natural to folk tales embellished, across the centuries, by many anonymous voices but with one constant refrain: the ambiguity of human motive and the mystery of divine grace. When the young soldier, Currito, is shipwrecked, is he saved by his devotion to the rosary despite his fleshly sins? By the piety of Doña Ana? By their effort combined in unconscious communion? Or by a divine decision unaffected by either perfidy or prayer, because Currito is essentially good? Is Doña Jeronima a harlot, the Archbishop of Manila a holy man? Or is she saintly and he perverse? Do flesh and spirit struggle for exclusion of one another, or for balanced condominium? Does not the yearning of the eighteenth century magus, Mateo the Maestro, to see eternity (by grafting a dead man's eyes onto his own, like a Janus-faced voyeur) represent everyman's will to persist, to escape time, as the GI manages to do temporarily when he suddenly sees the Walled City rise whole and entire from its wartime rubble? And is that will to be more than transient sacrilegious or inspired?

Such stories are authentic replicas of ancient tales of superstitious folk. Yet even more they are postmodern visions of blossoming possibilities based on skepticism turned against itself, so that faith is given the benefit of man's doubt. The same is true of "Summer Solstice," which has less patina and filigree, less gemlike encrustation than these legends, but which offers the same human dilemma: the difficulty that imperfect beings have when, for society and simplicity's sake, they must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, when conceivably the two may be as inseparable as *yin* and *yang*.

Equally serious from this perspective, and equally dependent on an experience outside time, are two other stories. In "May Day Eve" Agueda sees in her mirror both her future husband and the devil as one just as he claims *she* is both witch and wife; and "Guardia de Honor" alternates cross-generational scenes with attempts to outwit premonition in a dramatization of the endless struggle between choice and destiny, will and circumstance. The "cinematic techniques" of the latter story — quick cuts, fades, superimposition — are repeated in "Candido's Apocalypse." Although they can be explained as the effect of the years which Joaquin spent reviewing movies for the *Philippines Free Press*, their literary function may simply arise from a need to provide impressions of simultaneity as finite emblems of infinity. In this eagerness to be genuine and spontaneous, Bobby Heredia assumes the ability of St. Candido to see through people. Stripped of their clothes and flesh and skeletons, however, people seem in their final essence reducible to pure void. Perhaps that humbling apocalyptic discovery is the perfect *via mystica*. But Bobby misses people, along with the capacity for feeling, companionship, and love which he identifies with them. He decides that the act of Incarnation has redeemed all flesh, and that holiness lies in a golden mean somewhere between love-beyond-judgment and judgment-beyond-love. The human enterprise depends on the search for that "somewhere," the omega point of convergence and transformation.

Even more intensely imbued with the terror of mystery is "The Order of Melkizedek," which is indebted in part to the equivocal nature of the husband-devil in "May Day Eve" or perhaps to an aside, by Fr. James Donelan at a 1962 Ateneo symposium, that ". . . Mr. Joaquin is a sort of Melchisedech who comes upon the scene anointed but unexplained." But most of all it is indebted to Joaquin's studied habit of trying to encompass all possibilities at once, as an expression of both the vastness of man's imagination and the problems of certitude that plenitude brings. The story begins with a simple confusion of the narrator's identity. It advances through the trial identities of his niece. It climaxes in the diabolic/priestly figure of Melchor/Melkizedek who may have been one (or all) of the Magi kings or, parentless, as anciently undescended as Adam himself. He seems the continuing persona of

a Pangasinan commune-leader, in an earlier time, who now loudly proclaims the carnal Christ. Like Guia, Melkizedek seems "almost not another person" to the narrator who feels entranced (converted? drawn? doomed?), identified with the protean quality in this mysterious figure. Melchor/Melkizedek is a defrocked priest; nevertheless he is a priest forever. Is it evil's grip on man's unconscious, or the pull of grace beyond understanding, that makes his arguments attractive and gives credence to his charisma? Which shines more: the demon in the angel, or the angel in the demon? Whole histories have engaged that very question, and left it still cryptic.

Joaquin at his best illustrates how fiction as mindscape presents the largest view *possible*, a timeless but not quite eternal view, a preternatural but not quite supernatural view — an overview that is, therefore, cautious and conscientious, at once bold and humble. It only seems to seem; and ultimately it does only seem. Fiction is speculative, because man, in transit, is experimental.

GILDA CORDERO-FERNANDO

Life is large, but terribly uncertain. To classify Joaquin's stories as "gothic" may keep the mind from trembling, then tumbling on and on through space, since categories are like fences that domesticate wild thoughts. But if that security-through-confinement, the gothic label, can be relaxed long enough, significant similarities may be seen, between Joaquin's selected stories and the collection by Gilda Cordero-Fernando, "A Wilderness of Sweets" (1973). What is common to us all is the impulse to dream, and the responsibility for *trying* to distinguish the creative from the destructive. Only literalists "know" what is substance and what is symbol. Too rarely do we admit the possibility (probability?) that much of what is considered substantial is only ephemeral, partial, preliminary, peripheral.

Fernando's stories are bitter-sweet tales of love in the most fundamental sense of never-completed yearning after completion (equivalent to Joaquin's eternal search for eternity). Only one story, "The Dust Monster," offers this fable at the light-hearted level which makes one-third of the 1962 volume, *Butcher, Baker, Candlestick Maker*, gentle satire on the decorative but vacuous

lives of the Philippine upper middle class. Reve (Dream!) fantasizes a courteous male companion for herself out of household dust, until her husband Sergio finally abandons his own little flirtations and decides to "clean house." It is the only story in the collection which is finally resolved.

On either side of this pleasant parable are devious narratives of far more pathetic fancy and profound infidelity, unlimited by age or social position. Helen, seventeen-year old narrator of "Early in Our World," has a crippled brother, a dead father, a mother absent in her own dream world, and, nevertheless, expectations of there being somewhere a better world than this graveyard of cannibalized buses where her castoff family live. Her protector and idol is the magician, Simon Plaza, who for a living lets darts be thrown at his bare back, saying, "If you will yourself not to bleed, you will not bleed." He is considered a wonder-healer, and although he cannot cure her brother's legs, she offers herself to him. When he ruefully refuses, she lets her suitor Rogel have her virginity instead. Is this an act of defilement or of initiation of foreshadowing womanly fullness? She says, with poise (complacency?): "I survey our impermanent kingdom at last with gentleness." The story stops; the mystery remains.

In "A Secret Aging" a professor of botany seemingly moribund at fifty-five, with a dominant wife, feels rejuvenated in the presence of Xenia, a seventeen-year-old guest in his house. Jealously, he "rescues" her from her wild boyfriend Rally and then empathizes with her rage when Rally runs off with her money and another girl. Looking at her wretched face, he thinks: ". . . we are two of a kind — we are the easily-bruised, the forever-adolescent, the always-in-love." When Xenia finally leaves, he huddles with his wife for warmth. But Fernando has already made her unconventional point out of the conventional situation. What is adulthood? when is it reached, short of that last "passage," death? What is adolescence, with its disorderly hopes and excesses and sulks, if not all of life? if not an ageless demand for something more permanent — a place, personhood, perfection?

That implied meaning is confirmed by the book's general structure. On each side of the central fable are paired the story of an adolescent and the story of an adult, with identical problems. In "A Wilderness of Sweets," Joy's teen-age boyfriend Badel,

turned guerrilla, becomes a "brash young patriot who had no room for anything in his heart but war." This is linked in "A Cake Left Out in the Rain," with the unsuccessful adultery attempted by a woman deserted by her husband after the sudden death of their only child.

For four adolescent years, Joy has sought something that would justify her name, during a brutal Japanese occupation. Her engagement to Badel is that promise. They plan to elope, when they can no longer stand being deprived of the "magic land" they conjure up at parties, journeying "*through glittering tents, groves of myrrh, flowering odors, cassia, nard and balm, a wilderness of sweets.*" She awakes from that dream of ecstasy, to hear that Badel has gone to war. Even liberation, later, becomes "a wilderness of slaughter," in which Joy's brother Leo is killed and she, bereft, lonely and still longing, has no flower to give his corpse but only a stick of GI gum.

How could the grief of Amy, in the final story be greater? By the end of "A Cake Left Out in the Rain" she has lost her child, her husband, her Peace Corps lover (who is shamed by the innocence of her affection). Is her pain increased, or is it nullified, by the fact that nevertheless she still is not dreamless? In the full sun, off a side street, she listens to an old friend, once an antique collector, now an impoverished dealer, tell how some day "he would sell all, all of this junk to some dumb foreigner and buy himself a white island in the middle of the sea." So the pulse of the mind beats on, drumming into the never-nearer distances.

Space is so boundless that it can be as frightening as freedom. Still the restless, magisterial mind wanders/ventures across it, willy nilly. After all, what satisfies a mature person most is his inability ever to be perfectly satisfied.

CONCLUSION

There is a widespread notion that fiction's principal function is to assemble and duplicate data, draw clear conclusions from these, and then provide explicit directions for actions they generate. But for other writers, less disposed to narrow ideology and programmed reflexes, investigation means meditation. And action means traversing not just the mindscape surface (which is complicated

enough, being not only as vast as forever, but more mountain than plain), but the subterranean caverns as well, those innermost reaches where the dark has never known dawn. There one moves by premonition and postponement, intimation, cold sweat, pretending not to be intimidated by the meagerness of manifestations declaring that we may be only minor grandees. We know *coming* and *going*. Do we ever know *here/now*? What is the moral equivalent of that steady wind against the brain stem? The only land-makers are the voyagers themselves. One wonders.

Yet, for writers like Joaquin and Cordero-Fernando, if definition — like infallibility — is always premature, so is despair. It should be equally rare.