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Telex Moon by Cirilo Bautista

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Book Reviews

TELEX MOON. By Cirilo Bautista. Manila: Integrated Research Center, De La Salle University, 1981. 99 pages. ₱29.50.

Telex Moon is the second book in the *Trilogy of St. Lazarus*, a poetic-historical rendering of the evolution of the Filipino soul as the poet envisions it. It is supposed to develop the schema and work on the same leitmotif used in *Archipelago* (the first book), this time through the intelligence of Rizal who, "situated in a vantage psychic position, shifts and moves through time and space, evaluates and brings into converging point the book's vision, to be finalized, fulfilled in the third book of the trilogy." The *Trilogy of St. Lazarus* conveys the Filipino psyche, the "uniqueness and beauty of the Filipino Experience," using the poet's own words.

The epic is divided into three movements each consisting of ten parts, each part in turn made up of twenty-five pentametric quatrains. Part one shows Rizal in the astral plane, Rizal, "Conscience of the City," point of authority (after James' post of observation) as he contemplates the city, both accuser and accused, bewailing a city grown old, cold, with its "earthbound denizens/tied to wealth and therefore by wealth possessed . . . its god/was Internal Revenue to which people chanted strange songs."

A historical-cosmic grief turns personal as Rizal expresses his own abject submission to the tyranny and wiles of the city and what it had made of him: "cold without gold to gild his name." Alternating between these two levels of despair, Rizal as consciousness becomes quite perceptibly the contemplating empirical voice of the poet in the denunciations of the sociopolitical milieu, not the city but the people; the patriarchs, the gluttons, the potentates, the charlatans, and so forth.

The poet lashes and rants at them, at the rank materialism of an age, the vices of earthbound denizens caught in the swirl and dance of death, an envisioned dance macabre as given by the governor-general in a royal ball at intramuros:

The dance itself. The bony spirals of light
the sounds that tickle the tin-man sickle

in a cycle of boots and slippers and
goblets and gleaming tiles.

In the next instant, the poet draws richly upon the sea metaphor, swinging away from what is ephemeral and earthly into underlying subsidiary themes of time and timelessness, arrested movement and eternality, before he goes back to intoning a contempt for telex machines, sex, reason unhinging reason, the secularism of the swarm, all in preparation for the major metaphor, the telex moon, of the third part. Part one ends with Rizal's lamenting his inability to move forward and do anything of historical moment, to "dazzle and muzzle the bloodhounds in the till, to break the City Halls and the City Walls/for exiled or not, he is ready for the butcher's block."

Part two establishes Dapitan as locale, with Rizal, an exile upon the orders of Governor-General Despujol, back to his earthly body, recreating his idyllic life with Josephine Bracken. Dapitan with its serenity and solitude becomes foil to the whirl and wanton ways of the city. Now, almost tenderly, and poignantly, the poet is romantic and rhapsodic over Josephine, over woman, over love lost, love triumphant, even as Rizal, the romantic-pacific, by love empowered, chooses kinship with the stars, resigned to his fate, not caring about death, having died countless, and no amount of raging against the enemy can ease the weeping and the pain. Rizal weeps, his pain, the pain, of the world. "Such it is in the beginning, and in the end."

Part three focuses once more on Manila, as telex moon looms bright and glaring, symbol of the city's materialism and greed, hovering over and attracting into its brilliant orbit a frenzied populace. *Telex Moon* is dynamic center, its centrifugal forces effecting a widening gyre, spreading out beyond reach and control, a moral basis of order crumbling as finally, the poet sounds an optimistic note: "the mechanism of faith with/its brilliant bolts and miracles/its beats and monocles/shall break the telex moon/and scatter its hypnosis in the dump . . . to dissolve in the splendid grace of Selfhood."

The poet himself says that the argument of *Telex Moon* is simple. The reading, we think, however, is not quite. The reader is baffled, bewildered, and is oft times badly battered, as he struggles through lyric and lore, through a welter of allusions drawn from the poet's vast readings, the sacred books of India, China, contemporary art criticism, art history, occult sciences, and the Christian Bible. The ambiguities stem from this penchant for heaped-up allusions, unusual and impenetrable in a single isolated context, undecipherable unless the reader himself submits to the abstruse and intractable conditions of the poem; ambiguities which are made more bewildering and battering if not altogether exasperating to a host of other readers on account of the poet's conscious display of word power, of word legerdemain, the supra-verbal thrusts of the witchery of the poet's jugglery, his calendrics and flum-

mery and alphabetic itches stumping, stupefying. Consider:

The sex of telex brings the grex an ax
tells exactly the factly lack of lex
though in electric stockrooms it is rex;

And again, the drone of the consistently adroit, consistently pentametric pattern of quatrains; the din of rhetoric, the conscious alliterative play, as we, mesmerized, play it by ear now:

I will not kowtow to your hoi poloi
I will not relax your tax nor your sex,
I will not anoint nor appoint your kins,
I will not compute your repute for sins.

Apparently, the poet is enjoying this sense of power over his medium. Once, he was heard to have said that poetry for him was really not the result of a battle with himself (as is the case with most poets) but with words. He would stop writing poetry when he is finally assured of this victory over words (after he finishes his trilogy, perhaps?) and he may say *consumatum est*, finally allowing himself the privilege and luxury of a ripened old age. Knowing Cirilo, the artist, this battle is bound to take forever. For every artist realizes that each work of art is always a fresh venture, a renewed encounter with all the forces that seem to stand in the way but eventually pave the way for aesthetic fulfillment. And in this sense, no artistic battle is ever resolved, even as it is for the moment fulfilled, and fulfilling.

Telex Moon's landscape is vague, unfamiliar, the poet continually straining inward, remaining there most of the time, with rather tenuous renderings of action and objective situation which could serve as narrative framework and realistic base for the fumbling reader. For the epic is truly modern, an expression of the contemporary sensibility, an artistic consciousness which has withdrawn more and more into itself, drawing more from psychic than concrete realities, and these tend to be terribly fluid and private. The reader's imagination is strained, as the poet shuttles from strict metaphor to loose rhetoric, chucking communication almost completely, his style stretched to such a point as to sometimes lose its elasticity.

The poem is both intellectual and anti-intellectual, serving most effectively the contemporary demand for rich poetic tensions, its metaphors new, and yet old and rock-firm as time.

Like *Archipelago*, this book flaunts a new poetic which engages the full responding faculties of the reader, allowing much room for the free play of the receptive imagination as it is exercised with, possibly, the greatest facility and agility. It latches on to the role of history and myth in the life of the artist and in the life of any other man for that matter. The Bautista mystique and sensibility can be a powerful current in today's literature, which grows

out of this very modern sense of senselessness and a threat of an apocalypse in varied manifestations. This apocalyptic imagination utilizes an exploding center and a radiating surface of a centrifugal form where organic connections and image patterns become almost indiscernible, incohesive. How does one rise to the challenge of such a brilliant aesthetic?

However, the real significance of this poet's art lies in the poet's willingness to assume the pains of a solitary journey to this side of loneliness and fatigue, a journey to which the artist who cares enough not to mind the risks of true art, is perpetually consigned.

Ophelia Alcantara-Dimalanta

ETHNOGRAPHIC ATLAS OF IFUGAO: A STUDY OF ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY IN NORTHERN LUZON. By Harold C. Conklin. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980. vii, 116 pages. 47½ x 41½ cm.

Harold C. Conklin has been student of Ifugao's land and people for some twenty years now. In that span of time he has come to know and love that land and its people to whom he dedicates this latest and superb work of scholarship.

The most outstanding recurring image in this book is that of terraced land — the result of "amazing feats of hydraulic engineering and resource management" (p. 38). The four or five centuries that it has taken to build the terraces, and its maintenance by "constant repair, extension, restructuring, and the dynamic recycling of resources" have produced "approximately 20,000 kilometers of terraced embankments . . . 7,000 of which are stone-walled" (ibid.). The land that is the subject of Conklin's opus is almost equally the product of nature and of the sculpting hand of man.

Incredible skill and ingenuity . . . are employed throughout Ifugao in the productive treatment of water, soil, rock, and stone, as well as in the use of domesticated biota, hand implements, and human labor. Almost all forms of the available earth surface are considered transformable and transportable. Stream water for irrigation is diverted and conveyed by canal for distances up to five or six kilometers. Soil and fill are transported hundreds of meters. Rock and stone are broken and carried similar distances. Valley slopes and ridges are reshaped by extensive terracing. Small ad hoc work groups, . . . construct massive diversion weirs and stone-walled embankments of many types (p. 37).

As a consequence of the type of labor needed for the construction and maintenance of the terraces, steel-bladed implements, dynamite, and cement are "universally welcomed." On the other hand, "plows, pumps, and chemical