

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Desolate Loneliness within the Premises of Guilt

Bienvenido Lumbera

Philippine Studies vol. 13, no. 4 (1965): 850–859

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Review Articles

*Desolate Loneliness Within the Premises of Guilt**

THE historical novel is a genre that Filipino writers in English seem hesitant to touch. Considering that so much Tagalog popular fiction has been written about our more remote past, one may wonder why our English writers have rarely made use of historical material. Is this indicative perhaps of their alienation from the culture the past represents? Does the language used by a creative writer cut him off, in fact, from that part of the national experience antedating the literary use of that language among Filipinos? Has Nick Joaquin's command of Spanish, for instance, anything to do with that historical dimension which gives his fiction depth and significance? These questions seem relevant today when our thinkers and writers turn to every conceivable mirror in the search for a definite national image.

Among the more sophisticated writers, the reason for the neglect of historical fiction is possibly technical. They are aware, as craftsmen, that the use of history raises technical problems that they may not be prepared to tackle. To the stern discipline of craft are added restrictions that the facts of history impose on the workings of the creative imagination. This is specially true when the writer picks a historical figure or event as the determinant of action in his work. To treat

* THE PENINSULARS. By Linda Ty Casper. Manila: The Bookmark Inc., 1964. 303 pp.

history as though it were fiction is to shirk the discipline that would mark him out as a master-illusionist, one who can juggle facts and fancies without himself losing track of which is which.

As a juggler, Linda Ty Casper falters several times in *The Peninsulars*. This is because her initial strategy in plotting the novel binds her to a pattern inimical to what seems to be her intention. The book is set in Filipinas of the 1750's. It tells the story of Santistevan, aide to the Governor-General, descendant of an impoverished Aragonese family of the lower nobility, not yet quite twenty, and very much a bumbling romantic hero in the courtly love tradition. The young man attaches himself to a succession of personal idols in groping toward an identity which eludes him because he is too self-centered to see other people as they are and to relate to them accordingly. His, therefore, is a pathetic pilgrimage from one illusion to another like Don Quixote's journey unrelieved by illumination to the very end when, dying during the British siege of Manila, "even to himself he had become inaccessible." His epitaph may be taken from a passage in which an indio priest regards him with objectivity after confession:

Santistevan was the Peninsular incarnate, the would-be tragic hero—torn between being benevolent and greedy, and in that equivocation losing the sense of living under God, and therefore placating even irrelevant saints in an effort to seem pious and justified. The things Santistevan confessed had happened beyond his intentions, outside of his will. But even suspecting these things, Fray Licaros lacked the courage to tell Santistevan that he had reduced the Mother of Incarnation to a statue, so that he could postpone the regenerative act of divine favor, and so he himself had been reduced to a statue. That because he had attached himself to so many he could not achieve his final manumission.... (pp. 293-294)

Although the passage may give the impression to the contrary, Mrs. Casper does not seem to be interested primarily in dramatizing an insight into Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines. This is suggested by the liberties she takes with historical events and personalities. The action of *The Peninsulars* covers the decade leading to the coming of the British in 1762. During the period, Manila had two governors-gen-

eral: Francisco Joseph de Obando (1750-1754) and Pedro Manuel de Arandia (1754-1759). Mrs. Casper telescopes the events that transpired during the terms of Obando and Arandia into the period of incumbency of the nameless Governor-General of the novel. Historical events themselves have been fictionized. Book One closes with a military mutiny that results, among other things in the break-up between the Governor-General and his aide, but there is no known record of a military mutiny between 1750 and 1760. The Moro siege of Guinigaran, Negros, in Book Two is based on an anonymous account of the siege of Palompong in Leyte in 1754. The British invasion of Manila, which brings the novel to its climax and conclusion, is made to appear as a private attack planned in Batavia between an English opportunist named Falkener and the Dutch East India Company.

While history qua history is not Mrs. Casper's concern, she has chosen a Governor-General to be one of her principal characters, thus calling attention to the historicity of certain details in her novel. This is unfortunate, for her fictionizing of history undermines the verisimilitude she takes enormous pains to create. The tactical error committed, Mrs. Casper proceeds to use people and events of 18th-century Filipinas as a framework for a timeless theme of the human condition. The theme is succinctly phrased in the confession scene noted above: "Listening, the priest felt the desolate loneliness of one caught within the premises of guilt."

Desolate loneliness threads together the web of lives unravelled in the novel. It is a fearsome condition in the book—driving men to dreams of glory that taint them with corruption which in turn results in extinction, both metaphorical and physical. Using recurring metaphors like the land-burrowing crabs that once crawled on Santistevan or the empty picture-frame in the hall of the Governor-General's palace, Mrs. Casper amplifies the implications of the theme. First, loneliness is the result of the isolation of one individual from another, each one pursuing in secret his dreams of power, wealth or glory, unwilling or unable to trust his fellow men. In such a world, loyalty is prized because love

has become impossible. Loneliness is also the isolation of a people who do not feel at home in the land they inhabit. The Peninsulars in Filipinas are an anachronism—they left Spain in search of new lands, settled in those lands, but they continue to long for the country they left behind. The nostalgia they live by brings about another kind of isolation: the Peninsulars and the indios are separated by a cultural gulf whose divisiveness is duplicated within each cultural group by class distinctions based on birth, wealth, power, education, etc.

In two characters — the Governor-General and Santistevan who are actually two faces of the same Peninsular coin, loneliness becomes the more desolate because each, in isolation, has to grapple with the torment of a violated conscience.

When he was new in Filipinas, the Governor-General was a man who ordered his career according to his personal integrity which alone gave him distinction in class-conscious Manila. He had no titles to decorate his name, no noble lineage to recommend him to society. But he had honesty, and he had power as the highest colonial official in the islands. Late in his term, he begins to worry about posterity. He has failed so far to achieve anything for which his term may be remembered. A military man, he conceives the grandiose scheme of building "floating bastions," armed galleons that can be used for conquest and defense. Since the ships can be constructed only in Siam, the venture is far too expensive for the depleted colonial treasury. But the Governor-General is determined to be remembered in history. He thinks of getting the funds from the leader of the Chinese merchants in the Parian, but the odor of corruption appalls him and he backtracks. But Capitan Chino divines his vulnerability and secretly leaves him token jade rings and a chest of gold and silver coins. The process of corruption has begun. As a member of the board of trustees of the *obras pias*, the Governor-General knows where to turn for funds. He uses the rich indio merchant Don Paco to secure a loan of 80,000 pesos which he approves. And so the floating bastions are made. It seems for a while that the Governor-General has finally

achieved the deed that will perpetuate his memory. But typhoons batter the galleons at sea and the wrecks that reach Manila give the Royal Fiscal his long-awaited chance of destroying the Governor-General. The Royal Fiscal exposes the scandal and, by a forged confession, unseats the Governor-General. The latter falls ill — rumors say he is poisoned—and dies planning the defense of Manila against the British, a military feat that at some other time would have earned him the fame he has so desperately craved.

Early in the novel, in a moment of recklessness, the Governor-General tells his aide: "When I die, Santistevan, I shall will my conscience to you." But after the indiscretion of sending for Capitan Chino and receiving the merchant's unwelcome gifts, the Governor-General realizes that "until death his conscience would be his own." It is characteristic of the quixotic Santistevan that he is unable to tell illusion from reality—at the death of the Governor-General, he burdens himself with what he assumes to be a clean conscience that stirs his own tainted conscience to life. In a sense, of course, he does inherit the Governor-General's conscience even before the old man dies. The same erratic conscience that so torments the Governor-General is to be found in Santistevan. The aide seduces Araceli, then discovers that she is the sweetheart of his friend Agbayani. He notices that Agbayani is still alive after the execution, but hesitates to save him before the *coup de grace* is delivered. Because the Governor-General denies his plea for a pardon for Agbayani, he leaves his service to fight the Moros. He conceals from Leïsseline and Elenita the fact that their daughter would probably have escaped death if he had not removed the little girl from the sleeping father's lap during a lull in the Moro siege. Finally, his hesitation once again costs a friend's life when he fails to protect Fray Licaros from the latter's executioner. The legend on Santistevan's sword ("Unsheathe me not in vanity. More cowards there would be, if more men had courage.") thus becomes an ironic reminder of his lack of moral courage. The resulting guilt hounds the young man to destruction without allowing him the grace of finding his identity—that which

will make him see what he is, what he wants, and what he can do.

The juxtaposition of the characters of the Governor-General and Santistevan suggests that Mrs. Casper's novel also passes some kind of judgment on Spain's colonial record in the Philippines. The parallels and contrasts between the two hint at a deliberate effort to personify the Peninsular who is to lose Filipinas a century and a half later. Santisteban, it may be noted, is one of the names of Pedro Manuel de Arandia, the real-life governor-general who ordered a ship to be built in Siam which, according to Martinez de Zuñiga, "had such ill fortune that in bringing it over to Manila it was driven to port in China three times, and once to Batavia, causing enormous expenses to the royal treasury."

Through the effective use of a revolving point of view, Mrs. Casper creates the milieu that shapes the fate of the Governor-General and his aide. The jealousies and intrigues that marked colonial administration during the period are represented by the malevolent Royal Fiscal, whose relations with the good and the strong have been twisted by a deformed leg; and by Don Epifanio, the royal emissary who is also a silk merchant from the Peninsula trying to eliminate Chinese competition, whose Machiavellian economic tactics bring about an abortive military mutiny.

The military, to which both the Governor-General and Santistevan belong, dominates the world of the novel. It includes Agbayani and Fray Licaros, two indios in whose lives one may read the fate of the oppressed whose identity colonialism has effectively stifled. Agbayani is a Creole but he classifies himself as an Indio. Resentful of his indeterminate origins, he refuses to attach himself to anybody, turning callous to suffering, both his and others', and finally seeking realization by dying for a rebellion without a cause. Fray Licaros is an indio priest who straddles three worlds—the military, the religious and the oppressed.

The world of the religious has been profaned by secular interests as in the *Noli* and the *Fili*. Its chief dignitary is the Archbishop of Manila, pompous and arrogant as an ecclesiastic

but quite willing to lend aid against a political rival. Don Paco represents the indio faithful although he considers himself neither Peninsular nor indio, only a merchant whose piety is as great as his wealth. Fray Caricio is a type made familiar by the Rizal novels; he is the fiesta-loving parish priest of Guinigaran who is more concerned over the damage to his church than the loss of lives during the Moro siege.

Other representative types are Doña Gabriela, widow of a former governor-general, who hopes now to recapture her position of eminence by marrying the incumbent governor-general; Falkener, the English opportunist whose forces overrun Manila at the close of the novel; Carre, the French scientist, with ideas straight from the Age of Enlightenment; and Leis-seline, another Frenchman, who has married an indio girl and become part of his wife's culture in his vast farm in Negros. Finally, there is Araceli, an indio girl sketchily characterized but made to figure prominently in the life of Santistevan. The sullen Dulcinea to Santistevan's Quixote, she moves through life like an animal, submitting to it the way she submits her body to men—with neither joy nor love.

The variety of characters in *The Peninsulars* is indication enough of the breadth of the novel. The breadth however is not always matched by depth. Somehow the author overlooks many opportunities of infusing through technique deeper life into the characters. For instance, she barely sketches the details of Capitan Chino's call on the Governor-General when the scene is crucial to the structure of the novel, it being the first step toward the disaster that destroys the Governor-General. Also, we are told that Santistevan and Agbayani are friends, but we are not presented with any one scene which would establish the friendship that is instrumental in the estrangement of Santistevan from the Governor-General. And then, Santistevan is made to idealize Araceli to the extent of having him identify her with the Blessed Virgin, a psychological miracle considering that the background to the relationship consists of no more than passing hints. All this is puzzling to one impressed by Mrs. Casper's *The Transparent Sun and Other Stories* (Peso Book, 1963) as a book marked by technical excellence bespeaking a sophisticated craftsman.

It is in her portrayal of Fray Licaros that the novelist reminds us of the skillful short story writer. Fray Licaros is the only character in the book that one can understand without having to fill in gaps left blank by the writer's craft. A priest without a parish, Fray Licaros turns to fighting Moros, thus giving meaning to his life and vocation through force of arms. Like the rest of the characters, he is alienated. The Spaniards, out of prejudice, refuse to confer on him his identity as a priest when they deny him a congregation. Without a parish, he has no way of reaching his fellow indios from whom he is isolated by his position and education. Only by fighting Moros, the enemies of his Faith, is he able to fulfill his vocation as a man of God. But even this means turns unsatisfactory. During the siege of Guinigaran, Fray Licaros begins to wonder whether he does not have more in common with the Moros than with the Spaniards whose side he defends:

Did they (Moros) consider Filipinas their land, themselves as self-appointed defenders, because the indios could not resist the Europeans on their own and had been pacified and reduced to tribute collectors and tribute payers? Somehow, he felt a kinship with Moslems. (p. 204)

Such ability to arrive at insights about himself and others distinguishes this indio priest from the other characters who live out their lives blindly. It is through his mind that Mrs. Casper works out the meaning of *The Peninsulars*. When Santistevan fails to avert the shooting of Fray Licaros, we understand that the young man has lost his final chance of finding himself:

All that he could do in the living darkness of the fort that now hid Fray Licaros from him was to unfasten his sword and leave it behind, in an act of self-absolution. Then he too ran away. (p. 297)

We understand too that in Santistevan's failure the fate of the Peninsulars as conquistadores has been foreshadowed.

The contemporary Filipino novel in English has inherited from the *Noli* and the *Fili* an allegorical tradition by which the personal lives of the central characters pattern out the theme of Filipinas or The Growth of Our Nation. There is a danger inherent in this tradition—the novelist may tend to

load his work with an allegorical burden that the realistic level cannot support. N. V. M. Gonzalez's *The Bamboo Dancers*, Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, F. Sionil Jose's *The Pretenders*, and Emigdio A. Enriquez's *The Devil Flower*—each one, in its own way and its own shape of artistry, follows the tradition which gives thematic vitality to all and formal defects of varying gravity to most. *The Peninsulars* does not push the allegorical meaning too far, thanks to Mrs. Casper's prudence, although the author goes far enough to create certain obscurities in characterization and structure, flaws that might have been avoided if she had resisted altogether the temptations of a very treacherous tradition.

Indecisiveness is perhaps Mrs. Casper's fatal error as a first-novelist. To begin with, she cannot seem to decide whether she is to remain faithful to history or rely solely on imaginative recasting of events and people. Although she has chosen a fictitious Governor-General, she strives to give the novel's history an atmosphere of authenticity to the extent of interfering with the narrative flow, as in the static early chapters of the book. And then, she is half-in-half-out in her intentions: she seems unable to decide whether she wants an insight into history itself, or an insight into the present through history. She tries to have both and, as a result, the illumination she throws on the historical events and on the personal lives of the characters is often fitful, leaving the frustrated reader to wish she had approached the rest of her material the way she did in the outstandingly successful *Book Two*. For its richly detailed realism, poise as a psychological study, and verve as narration, the portrayal of the Moro siege is unrivalled in Philippine fiction dealing with violence. The creative imagination here dramatizes physical and spiritual ravage with an intensity unencumbered by historical documentation, and the result is a harrowing experience that vindicates Mrs. Casper's talent as a fiction writer. For the vivid writing as exemplified in this chapter and for its insights into loneliness, *The Peninsulars* deserves to be ranked, in spite of its flaws, among the five significant novels Filipinos have written so far, the other four being Gonzalez's *Season of Grace* and *The Bam-*

boo Dancers, Joaquin's *Woman*, and Kerima Polotan's *The Hand of the Enemy*.

Mrs. Casper's novel sets certain precedents that are bound to affect subsequent efforts in the genre. While its distortions of history appear ill-advised, its use of actual historical documents (drawn principally from Blair and Robertson, XLVII and XLVIII) points a direction worth pursuing for its value as discipline for creative writers in general, and for the rich material it offers the Filipino writer in particular. At a symposium on Philippine writing in 1964, Fr. de la Costa had occasion to decry the lack of a historical perspective among our writers. *The Peninsulars* is the first of Philippine novels to correct such lack. One may hope that as the body of Filipino historical novels increases, our English writers' sense of alienation from the past will begin to decrease. Then the Filipino writer will cease to feel apologetic when his use of a foreign language is questioned. For indeed, there are many ways the returning native can take toward home. The use of our history opens one of them.

BIENVENIDO LUMBERA

The Philippines Between 1929 and 1946

IN the past decade there has been an increase of historical writing about the American presence in the Philippines. Prior to this awakening, the role of the United States had all but been forgotten by Filipino and American historians. And one of the most neglected areas was the Commonwealth era: its formation, its problems, and its agony under the Japanese heel. Professor Theodore Friend's study* is the first in recent years to analyze and evaluate the events in the

* BETWEEN TWO EMPIRES: *The Ordeal of the Philippines*, 1929-1946. By Theodore Friend. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965. x, 312 pp.