

# philippine studies

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

---

## **Joaquin: The Woman who had Two Navels**

Josefina D. Constantino

*Philippine Studies* vol. 9 no. 4 (1961): 639–650

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](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

The book is not medicinal, however, nor painful to read. The prose is controlled and disciplined and makes for smooth and easy reading. Bernad's prose is nowhere more limpid than in the descriptive passages on Ilocos (in the chapter on Manuel Arguilla). British and Australian readers have found the quality of Father Bernad's English particularly striking—a style emptied of jargon and prose cliches, at once terse, limpid and most effective. Best of all, he has succeeded in arousing interest in Filipino writers. From now on, said an English friend after reading *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE*, "I will try to read some of the Filipino writers, especially Joaquin".

The essays in Father Bernad's book could very well serve as a spur to make more people read the work of the writers discussed. His tone is one of sympathy for the writers and of encouragement for the prospective reader to "see for himself". Perhaps this is the right attitude to adopt considering the present state of Philippine letters: it is growing but it needs direction. It should be pruned rather than uprooted. There is every indication at the moment that in time we shall reap a healthy harvest in Filipino literature in English. For now our writers who show promise ought to be encouraged. This encouragement, I think, Father Bernad has given admirably in *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE*.

CARMITA LEGARDA DE CARRION

### *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*

One approaches the task of reviewing *THE WOMAN WHO HAD TWO NAVELS* with great reluctance, for here is excellence. Being asked to review a novel such as this is like being asked to explain a poem (whose meaning is in its being) or to explain the mystery of one's faith (half learned in darkness and light). The public articulation of a private joy is always a concession to the legitimate demand made on those who can only read

---

<sup>1</sup> *THE WOMAN WHO HAD TWO NAVELS*. By Nick Joaquin. Manila: Philippine Center, 1961. 226 pp.

not write novels. For a review can never be fair to a book, much less to a novel such as this, so singularly distinguished.

It is easy enough to tell its story, for it is a very good story. But to summarize the story is to render poetry into prose. It can be a waste of beauty. For the *goodness* of this novel is in its story, but its *beauty* is in its poetry and the two are never clearly separate.

The story begins in straightforward fashion. "When she said she had two navels, he believed her at once." She is Connie Escobar and he is Dr. Pepe Monson, confused over this stranger "insulated in black fur to her neck" (where gleams a necklace of pearls) who desperately wants a surgical operation. In his room in Hongkong on the Kowloon side at noonday in midwinter, surrounded by a portrait of General Aguinaldo, a bust of the Sacred Heart, brass candlesticks, and a horned *tamaraw's* head (symbols all of moral dimensions), Pepe Monson thought how like his father was this young woman, who when she had finished her tale had stared fixedly ahead.

For Pepe Monson's father is a self-exiled patriot who had always fed his sons on dreams of returning to their country but who had in fact just come back from a visit to it which he had ended abruptly and painfully and who seemed lost and ever more deeply unhappy since his return.

Connie Escobar's visit was followed immediately by her mother's call. Concha Vidal tells Pepe that it is not true Connie is thirty years old; she's only 18. It isn't true she was married just this morning, she's been married almost a year. "Yes, I'm *quite* sure she has only one navel". And no, Connie didn't marry; "I did it for her". Connie had told Pepe that she was "the Eve of the apple" at five years when she discovered that she alone had two navels; she decided that she must be a monster of a child. But Concha with her tale corrects Connie's version at every point. She tells Pepe that Connie ran away from home to be a dishwasher at a chop-suey joint because she thought she was being sent to an exclusive school on stolen money. But Connie had told Pepe that she ran away from home

because she heard her father operated on girls who had ruined themselves and had to be saved from scandal.

It is Connie's natural urge for decency that will finally redeem her.

But here in Hongkong mother and daughter are found pursuing the same man: Paco Texeira, bandleader, married to Spanish, brown-haired, sensible, decent Mary, mother of his children. Paco had gone to Manila to play, and after escapades with Concha Vidal found himself haunted by Connie even after he had cut brief his stay in Manila, ruining his career because of an unfulfilled contract. Now back home, even Mary and their children have not given him peace.

Connie's husband, Macho, follows her to Hongkong to avoid giving scandal to her politician father. He finds out that Connie has a bundle of letters that told her he had been her mother's passionate lover and that her mother had married them off together because she thought that was the best way of saving them both.

Pepe Monson, helpless before the two women, calls up his brother, Father Tony, who stays at St. Andrew's, a monastery up a hill near a cliff that looks down upon a chasm with the sea roaring below. He tells Tony that Connie, a woman with two navels, is to see him but he is "not to ask her to have babies or to say the rosary", leaving Father Tony confused and, later, frightened at this girl for whom he thought an older priest would be better. Now, the interview finished, Tony feels guilty for having deserted a soul that needed more understanding than that given by his ruthless probing into her motives. This probing had disclosed that the navel story was a lie in which Connie sought refuge against the harsh reality of the world which she did not or could not accept.

So Father Tony rushes down to look for her; tells Rita Lopez, his brother's fiancée, all about her; preaches to Concha Vidal on her responsibilities. Upon their return to the Monson house, Tony and Pepe find Connie there, trying to get into their father's room. Tony unmaskes Connie and tells her she

is a coward, refusing to be free to choose, wishing for the privilege of madness without being mad. And Connie confesses that she does not know what to believe anymore and is not sure of anything. Finally she submits to curative action. Pepe Manson will examine her and tell her definitively whether or not she has two navels. After this pronouncement she is to see Father Tony again if she wishes, and he hopes she will so wish.

Pepe Monson finds out the truth and Connie is shorn of her defenses. Here follows the stages in the agony of her symbolic destruction and resurrection: the whole experience of the soul contained within the ensuing trips to the monastery, up and down, once, twice, thrice, until finally the Jaguar in which she is driving is hurled down the cliff, burning, to the sea below. During this struggle of her mind and soul (all within a few hours of a single night) she imaginatively goes through *death by earth* (on a train where she finds Macho and both find themselves being destroyed); *death by water* (on a ship in "the womb of the sea, tasting of tears", where she finds her mother who refuses to save herself but bids Connie do so; but Connie chooses to lie beside her mother as the sea takes them into her bosom); *death by air* (on a plane where she finds her father, who looks like the Biliken, her Chinese carnival god and childhood orchard friend, lamenting that he has lost the power to rage but that Connie must not; that she must rage and fight and not yield). Finally she finds herself trying the uphill climb to the monastery once again, only to go back and drive up the cliff wishing for the womb of the sea (death). At the last minute, when in a moment of grace she realizes what she has preferred, she tears herself loose from the speeding car and is saved in a *death by fire*. One is awed by the magnificence of language here:

...the car shrieking as it plunged through space and hit a ledge and bounced up again, bearing her upward again, offering her up again to the night, to the moon—and then it happened: the blast, the hot blaze, the illumination; and the fire sprang up about her, fire crowded round her, fire enveloped her; she was clothed with fire, crowned and aureoled with fire, and she rose, transfigured on wings of flame, on a chariot of fire; she was the rockets blazing up to hail the moon, the

fireworks and firecrackers bursting with joy in the air; she was fire itself; beautiful blessed fire, the purifying element, the element of light; burning splendidly, burning exultantly, between the moon and the sea.

Quite suddenly she is keenly alive and grateful for the "roar of the living".

The rest of the unfolding is no less impassioned. In the recreated Magdalene scene which crowns her rebirth, Connie confesses and is purified. Rushing to the dying hero-exile, Dr. Monson, Pepe's father, Connie throws herself at his feet, saying: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned". And Dr. Monson, dressed in his faded blue uniform complete with sword, seeing the young woman crouched at his feet is first filled with alarm, then terror, then panic. For, living in his past memories, he had thought he recognized a face from the past; but "this was not the past but the present that had entered, that now lay crouched at his feet, sobbing out its wild and terrible story." Then Dr. Monson too is illumined and he blesses her unto new life; which now, too, becomes his own return to reality. He, too, is reborn upon the eve of his death and now finally he is *home* and able to say, full of faith and adoration. "*Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine*". Joaquin's interpretation of the scene is his pronouncement on its symbolic meaning: "Two generations that had lost each other here met in exile." The young girl and the old man find themselves at the same time and together. Then Connie, conscious of being free, says good-bye and goes out into the streets to find Paco.

While Connie was being grieved over as dead, with Macho refusing to give up hope of finding her body, Pepe Monson is handed a letter Connie wrote before Paco and she got on a boat for Macao that morning, running away together. Her postscript to Father Tony bequeaths a gift and a responsibility: the need for *hope*, that she may have the faith to act and the everyday courage to live rightly.

Please tell Father Tony I'm sorry I didn't find the courage to do the right thing, but he knows that for people like me it takes a lot of courage to do anything at all, even wrong, and having found the courage to do this now I may yet find the courage to do the other thing too.

The rest of the novel resolves all the questions previously articulated in pain. Father Tony, who has himself grown up through this deeply emotional experience, is deeply grateful that Connie has found the courage to go on living, even in sin. Wiser now and more fully surrendered to the providence of God's love, Tony assures Rita that *all* ways can be lead to God, even evil. Anguished at what Mary and her children can suffer because Connie has run away with Mary's husband, Paco, Father Tony reaffirms the interrelatedness of all lives, the true meaning of charity and mercy, but also the sacrifice that will be asked of Connie also, when God finds her strong enough for it, as Mary is strong enough now. Joaquin sums up the total affirmation of the heroism of repentance: "no sin, no repentance, no upheaval, no transfiguration, no growth of the spirit." For this is what the novel is about: man's awakening to himself and thus becoming a person dignified by free will and the moral responsibility of choice.

This attempt to trace out the essential thread of the story is, one realizes, at once too complex and too simple. It comes out as too complex because it tries to put in something of a straight line action which is not related in his way at all. And it is too simple because it makes what is presented as a shifting mosaic of past memories and present intensities, all interwoven, sound as if it were nothing more than a confused hodge-podge of wild rushings about. Imperious in his mastery of form, Joaquin has orchestrated his three universes into a flowing reality of the cosmic, the personal and the national. He reveals a fine and delicate sense of proportion and harmony in his selection of scenes and incidents and in his handling of the interwoven flashback material which yet does not overmaster the vibrant prose that carries the action of the present. How to hold the present in motion, yet smoothly flowing too into a long distant past and slowly, gently, naturally brought back to the present, making the present so much richer, never stale nor heavy nor too carefully explanatory, this is a compositional problem calling for constant technical mastery. The streams of consciousness of his characters create rhythm and montage patterns very like Virginia Woolf's — neat, limpid and con-

stantly flowing, until he imprints his own mark of distinction: his dramatic one-sentence summation of mood, moment and meaning, as when suddenly he lifts you up, completely detached, with one quiet sentence: "Only the moon intent on fulfillment moved through its own feast of silence." It is a rare power that makes possible a texture of reality that gripingly yet felicitously shifts from past to present, from illusion to fact, from passion to truth.

One notes carefully too how wisely and yet tantalizingly he closes each scene or chapter with an inevitable submission to the powerlessness of words and the greater, wiser eloquence and mystery of silence. Unwillingly going through with the crucial investigation of whether or not Connie has two navels, Pepe Monson is last seen opening the door to find out. "The room seemed extraordinarily still as he walked slowly towards the door." Joaquin rightly recognizes that there are moments of drama beyond words.

A rare power of language is required to cover, sweepingly and without sense of strain, the years from Concha Vidal at five to Connie's eighteenth year; or from the time of the Spanish regime when "the theater was alive and imprudent" to the liberation times after the Japanese occupation; or from a patriot's courageous defense of a mountain pass and his consequent self-exile, damning men and life as "crabs and dust", to his final realization that beyond the destiny of the Republic is his return to his true home that had waited all the time for his coming; or from a child's cry for a carnival god to a woman's desperate cry of wanting to know who she is and from what she came; or from a child's talk with her dolls to the ultimate *why* of evil. While, over all, there is the gradual emergence of existence's meaning, not illusion but reality, there is also the gradual progress of the characters from a wild unknowingness to a recognition of the ultimate meaning of life and suffering. To evoke and make all these discoveries within the three and a half days of the story's span is indeed a work not only of labor but of sensibility and grace, a wringing of magic from words. Joaquin's rhythmed sensibility is evident in the elegance and felicity of his diction. His evocation of



atmosphere makes possible an interpenetration of worlds of fact, of magic and of vision, the total story encompassing dream, illusion and reality. Only a poet with a poet's tongue can do all this.

Consider, for example, how much he suggests and with what beauty and precision. About history, as when he speaks of us as a people "that got as far as Baudelaire in one language and was being returned to the ABC's of another language". Or in a characterization, as of Esteban Borromeo, Concha's beau who made poetry out of his blasphemies of "Priapus appearing to St. Theresa; Aphrodite at the wedding in Cana"; or as of old Dr. Monson assuring his boys of their return to Manila, not knowing when but full of faith: "Only God knows. We must move Him with our silence." Again it may be a suggestion of a state of soul, as when Pepe Monson says: "In our world it is always Monday morning", or when Paco is drawn to the two Vidals, mother and daughter, "as though a rustic altar were drawing pilgrimages". There is Paco's liking Concha Vidal for her "flat sandpaper ruthlessness"; or Connie feeling "her identity rasping as though it were new"; or Connie in the throes of the death wish finding the sea "clean and cold and close—a smell like the smell of the womb, tasting of tears". How evocatively Joaquin presents Macho and Concha Vidal, new in the passion that ruled them as they stood on the ramparts of the old city walls, then suddenly:

The walls seemed rimmed with flame, belted with fire, cupped in a conflagration, for a wind was sweeping the avenue of flametrees below, and the massed treetops, crimson in the hot light, moved in the wind like a track of fire, the red flowers falling so thickly like coals the street itself seemed to be burning... and recounting the swift turn of events, all these should suddenly fuse into a pattern, exploding in his mind (as though flametrees had ignited a bunch of fireworks) in a great burning shower of joy.

Consider, too, how economically Joaquin *compresses*, with no sacrifice of experience, periods of time that could have taxed the power of another writer who feels he must "render" and not tell. For example, he very knowingly recounts how Esteban Borromeo had come "for the tremulous child whose display of tears had so enchanted him; he found a poised imperious

coquette, and was dismayed, then amused, then tantalized, then irritated, then indignant, and finally miserable". Consider further how he delivers, without mercy, simply and fully, one's long-kept weight of misery, as when Connie Escobar defines both herself and her mother: "I am your vanity, and your malice, and your cruelty, and your lust. I'm the fruit of all the evil you carry in you... born of evil; that was what you bore when you bore me." Yet note, too, how Joaquin sums up knowledge and pronounces the wisdom of centuries, as when he makes Father Prior say: "Evil begins with disgust, with pity, with a silly lie and a silly doll, and ends with possession by the Devil."

This is where the symbolism of the dolls is fully expressed: Minnie the doll and Biliken the carnival god made of paste and paper whom the war left with two bullet wounds looking like navels and in whose lap Connie deposits Minnie everytime she feels she has betrayed him. This is how Manolo Vidal's impotence to rage even against evil makes him like Biliken. Connie who is reborn from a crucifixion of confusion and pain becomes finally a *person*. But Concha Vidal, who "in dragon and pagan silks meditates on the Virgin", cherishes to her death the hero of stage and pen, her conscience, and misses the true, ennobling and transfiguring sense of the tragedy of living. The final mystery is hers, however, for the author wisely has Father Tony rushing to her bedside when she is dying, for she has sent for him finally; but she never recovers consciousness. All the events and characters in the novel, however, are explained fully and neatly, but subtly; the reader must carefully seek out the motives and explanations which are here and there and everywhere. Only Concha Vidal is left ultimately unexplained; but the ultimate *why* of evil, too, is a mystery.

The two navels is the key symbol in the story. It is symbolic of life's two universes, illusion and fact, which Connie and all the characters, except young Pepe Monson, inhabit; it is also ultimately symbolic of the two absolutes in life, good and evil: the navel symbolic of the origin of life. Principally, the two navels are symbolic of Connie, a creature born out of evil and good, out of Concha Vidal's evil and God's grace;

Connie influenced by Biliken, her carnival god and source of peace, and by her guardian angel. The two navels are symbolic of Connie's two existences — her childhood world of lies, ice cream and movies, and her adult world of confusion, betrayal and resurrection; symbolic, too, of her self-identity born of innocence and experience; her birth of her mother and her birth in God after her agony of spirit: her transfiguration.

Joaquin's novel, in many ways, is an epic in its own right. Not only does it grapple with ancient truths ever new to the uninitiated; but also it both parodies and exalts heroes of all types — Esteban Borromoeo, the Byronic hero whisked off to jail for his imprudent play who dies years later in poverty, still recreating the scene of his grand day; Macho whose full name is Telemachus and who, depraved from childhood, finally learns what decency is and in despair kills both Concha and himself, thinking them responsible for Connie's reported death; Manolo Vidal, member of the Board of Directors of the Carnival, who, Biliken-like in his impotence to rage even against evil, is much like Eliot's hollow men; Dr. Monson, the self-exiled patriot who finally realizes that his loyalty is not to the land but to a private past.

Concha Vidal's heroism partakes of an illusion to the end. Chided at her monstrous irresponsibility and cruelty to her child, Concha Vidal says:

Every night is the Chinese moon for me — time to pay old debts. Every morning I feel I have finally paid off the last one, then somebody comes in with more bills. And yet I don't think I have been that wicked. All I ever did was, one time I chose something else to God — and God has never forgiven me. I sometimes wonder if he ever will.

Constantly she confesses she is obsessed by the idea of God pursuing her. Yet while now and then pained at her daughter's reported death and this only a few hours before her own death, how

tenaciously she clings to life: . . . all this time my body's been wanting to put on silk and jewels and go walking in the rain — wanting to feel the wind and the rain, wanting to feel sensual and alive. Oh, Father, believe me: I don't feel finished at all yet.

Connie's own heroism constitutes the main story of the novel: from her outraged childhood sense of decency that drove her to be a dishwasher at a Chinese chop-suey place to her determination finally to face the world and to make her own decisions. It is a heroism explicitly expressed in her note to Father Tony: her first act in freedom being to run away with another woman's husband. She hopes she "may yet find courage to do the other thing too"; the right thing.

Feeling guilty of probably having driven Connie to her reported death, Father Tony muses: "Why shouldn't people delude themselves?... Nobody has any right to force people to cope with life, if they don't want to." Always clear-eyed, Pepe Monson reminds Father Tony that they themselves had only done their duty in sincerity and with purity of intention. As *alter Christus*, Father Tony himself, in his brief and painful conversion to faith in God's all-provident care, achieves the heroism of his vocation.

Many things could be said, in summary, of the novel. It is a story of quest: of growth and self-realization. It is also an odyssey of a country remembered and lived in in the lives of people of two generations and more personally in the lives of everyday saints and sinners. Again, it is a probing into the meaning of existence which ends in an affirmation of life very much like that of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*.

But the novel speaks beyond its own characters. It pays tribute to the daily heroism of all men who are committed to life and are grateful for it and are strong in their faith and hope that an all-knowing Father will see them through to salvation.

In assessing the significance of Joaquin's novel, readers may reasonably object to the use of the word *heroism* for the attempt of the principal characters in the novel to come to terms with reality. Connie's heroism as she emerges, purified, from her mental and spiritual tortures in the pattern of "deaths" she is made to undergo is only *minimal*: her goal is eventually to be decent, ordinary and good, like Rita and many others. But considering the alternative, real death, which

despite compelling attractions she definitively spurns, her heroism is much greater, it is in fact *crucial*; she has, after great anguish, irrevocably and gratefully committed herself to life.

Exiles on this earth, men are pawns to angel or devil, and when men refuse to accept the reality of God and the devil, then they make of their stay here a carnival season and Biliken rules over them, since they have chosen illusion rather than truth, sin rather than the good.

Clear-eyed and decent daily living is a type of heroism in itself; all-important for life is an encompassing compassion for men and an encompassing faith in God's care: these may well be the ultimate message of *THE WOMAN WHO HAD TWO NAVELS*. But such formulated "messages" are of less concern to the sensitive reader than the primary source of the novel's beauty: the intense poetry of its language.

JOSEFINA D. CONSTANTINO