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Philippine Short Stories 1952

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PHILIPPINE SHORT STORIES 1952

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

THE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE may seem more ambitious than the content justifies. Perhaps a more appropriate caption would be: "A Critique of the Winning Entries in the *Free Press* Short Story Contest." However the winning stories are taken by the writer to be typical of the current output, not soaring above it (as the judges confess), nor on the other hand falling far below it. These stories may therefore be taken as witnesses and from their testimony conclusions may be drawn which can be applied to the field as a whole.

In conducting this yearly contest, the *Philippines Free Press* is rendering a twofold service to Philippine letters. By publishing stories, it affords an outlet to Filipino writers; by offering substantial cash awards, it makes it worth a writer's while to aim at a high literary quality in his stories. The judges for the 1952 contest were well chosen: Mr. Leopoldo Y. Yabes of the University of the Philippines, Mr. Juan Luna Castro of the *Manila Times*, and Mr. Teodoro M. Locsin of the *Free Press*. Their individual verdicts were published in the issue for December 13, 1952.

One of the judges took care to mention that the 1952 crop was not unusually rich. Said Mr. Yabes: "I did not find any outstanding story in this year's *Free Press* contest. I believe, however, that three stories can stand

more than one reading: 'The Virgin' by Patricia S. Torres; 'The Heritage' by Edilberto Tiempo; and 'Manong Ramon' by Gregorio Brillantes." The last story mentioned was not among the prize winners. Instead the third prize went to "The Doll" by Emigdio Enriquez, which Mr. Yabes includes among "other readable but less competently written stories." Even the three which Mr. Yabes has chosen, he praises only sparingly: "Although they betray occasionally an unsteady hand, these stories indicate seriousness and sincerity, and there is an authentic note to them."

Be that as it may, we may presume that what three competent judges have chosen as the best among the stories published during the course of a year in a widely read magazine, may be regarded as representative of current Philippine fiction, and as an index to the present state of Philippine letters. The winning stories therefore deserve some study.

1

A comparison of the three stories reveals a number of facts, some of which may be significant. The first is that all the stories are serious. Most Philippine stories are. There are few among us who aspire to be Wodehouses, or Mark Twains, or O. Henrys. Occasionally, one finds an attempt at humorous situations; for instance, "Measles" in the *Free Press* for November 1, 1952. But the broad humor of Father de la Costa's stories in the pre-war *Philippines Commonwealth*, and the more devastating humor of his "Kwentong Kutsero" series of radio plays (and of its present-day successor) find few counterparts these days.

What the significance of that fact is, it is hard to say. Perhaps the Filipino writer takes his craft seriously, and agrees with Henry James that a story is a portrait of life, and since life is predominantly serious, so must be the story. Or perhaps the serious story, like the sad *kundiman*, is deeply rooted in Philippine psychology, which makes the Filipino like the Irishman, of whom Chesterton wrote:

For the great Gaels of Ireland
Are the men that God made mad,
For all their wars are merry,
And all their songs are sad.

A second fact is that the three winning stories depend less on plot than on local color or character portrayal. Henry James of course protested against the distinction between "stories of incident" and "stories of character"; nevertheless, that eminent man to the contrary, such a distinction does seem to exist, and the Filipino short story, 1952 vintage, seems to belong to the category of "stories of character." The Filipino story-teller of the present day seems to be concerned less with the external world than with the inner world of a man's thoughts, sentiments, complexes, attitudes, and sufferings.

A study of the three stories reveals a third fact: they (like most Philippine stories) are written in a pastoral vein—understanding "pastoral" in the sense used by William Empson, namely, a "critical vision of simplicity." That is to say, these stories are about the simple life, a simpler culture than that to which the authors (or the readers) belong.

This may sound paradoxical in view of the second fact noted above. Stories with psychological preoccupations, aiming at portraying the complexes and complexities of the human spirit, are not generally (one would expect) laid in Arcadia. Yet there it is: these stories are both psychological and pastoral. It is significant, in this connection, that of the three stories, one is laid in a humble fishing village, and another in a provincial town. Only one is laid in the city, and that city (except for the presence of jeepneys) is really only a large *barrio*.

Which perhaps gives point to an observation made by Wallace Stegner in an article on Filipino writers:

At the moment not much of their material comes out of Manila, and this is surprising since practically all the literary life is carried on there. Manila is big, changing, complex, a mixture of half-altered *barrio* and the latest American gas-

station. Because it is difficult and troubling, most of the writers evade it; the material closest to their hearts lies in the villages, in the folkways of the provinces, back in the nostalgic bucolic world of Mindoro, Cebu, Ilocos, from which they come.

There is a basic irony in this that few writers seem to realize. Touched by the fierce white-collarism that makes Manila one of the dressiest and most ostentatious of cities, the writers are thoroughly urbanized. Like all educated Filipinos, they would resent the too-common American conception of their country as a loin-cloth nation. They insist on living in Manila, though it is almost beyond question the most expensive city in the world. But when they write, they write with their hearts, and their hearts are with the *carabaos* and the village boys bathing in a stream at evening, or with villagers celebrating a wedding or a funeral, or with some lonely farmer hewing out a *kaingin* in the jungle. They write with anger and bitterness of what the war did to the Philippines, but they write of what it did to the villages, not of what it did to Manila.¹

The phenomenon which Stegner has noted, however, is not a symptom of disease but a sign of health. Sophistication is still only skin-deep in Philippine culture. Yet there is sophistication of a sort, in Philippine letters, as the next paragraph will show.

And that is the fourth fact: an air of sophistication in at least two of the stories. This shows itself, for instance, in what seems to be a preoccupation with sex—not romantic love, but sex. Abroad, in older cultures, such a preoccupation might be a sign of decadence, of approaching old age. In the Philippines however, it is probably a sign that our literature is still in its adolescence. There are many stages in adolescence. At one stage, the carefully nurtured young person is afraid to talk of sex. At another, (particularly if physical adolescence is over, for mental maturity comes late at times) the adolescent actually wants to show off his knowledge of sex, to impress people with his imagined maturity, or even to shock their sensibilities and thus prove to them that he is emancipated. It takes time to regain one's balance, and balance is the sign of maturity—in art as in other things.

2

Let us now examine the stories singly. The first prize was awarded to the "The Virgin" by Mrs. Kerima Polotan Tuvera who wrote under the pen name, Patricia S. Torres (*FP*, Feb. 16, 1952). The story may be described as an incident in the love-life of a frustrated female, who can be called "the virgin" only in the most attenuated sense of the term—a term, incidentally, with sacred connotations, which are entirely absent in the present instance. She is a social worker, in charge of a placement office. Among her clients is a man with what is now called "masculine appeal" (if one wishes to avoid the more brutal term, sex-appeal): "He went to where Miss Mijares sat, a tall, big man, walking with an economy of movement, graceful and light, a man who knew his body and used it well." This man, despite the above-mentioned appeal, turns out to be no romantic hero. He is a sordid character who has fathered an illegitimate son by another woman, and who now takes advantage of Miss Mijares ("the virgin") during a rainstorm.

Let it be said, in all fairness to the author, that there is nothing immoral in the way the story is told. Still, we are not spared certain details: for instance, what Miss Mijares thought in the darkness when watching a kissing scene on the screen in the movies; how she wore her bodice, etc.

That is the weakness of the story: it talks too much, tells too much. Character is described, rather than revealed in incident. There are too many flashbacks. Consequently, one finds it somewhat difficult to share Mr. Locsin's enthusiasm, who calls this "a fine story, delicately wrought, with what seems to be complete control of language, not one word more than is needed, always the exact word. The story has a feeling of finality that is rare among our hit-and-miss writers today . . ." Maybe so. For my part, I find it easier to agree with Mr. Castro (who, like Mr. Locsin, assigns only second place to this story), that, though

"Mrs. Tuvera writes a fluent, workmanlike prose," still, "one wishes that the story had a little more depth, a bit more meat."

3

The second prize was awarded to "The Heritage" by Edilberto K. Tiempo (*FP*, April 5, 1952). It received one vote for first, one for second, and one for third place. This story has obvious defects: in language, the English is occasionally not idiomatic, and the dialect is handled awkwardly; in technique, there is a spot of overwriting, and there is some vagueness as to the general drift of the story. Despite these defects, one feels inclined to agree with Mr. Castro that this story is superior to the other two. For one thing, it has depth, which the other two do not have.

The story is of a "successful" man who has risen from a fishing hamlet (where the shacks have their backs to the sea) to Dewey Boulevard or some such place where the houses front the sea—only to find that he has acquired gastric ulcers in the process and has only a year to live. More accurately, the story is about a visit to the old fishing hamlet which he makes with his young son, in order to show the lad his "heritage". What this heritage is, is not clear. Mr. Castro is of the opinion that it consists of "the land, the tide, and the people that sustained him." I rather think that the heritage is death and the fear of death—the common heritage of that fallen humanity which the "successful" father, despite his success, has transmitted to his son. The father himself is no longer afraid of death because he has faced its terrors many times before. Only by going through fear, he thinks, does one become fearless; and so, he tries to teach his son fearlessness by teaching him fear: "I want you to know the terror of the tide, son. Facing death once, you can face it again. And again."

The fact that one can argue about the nature of the "heritage" indicates a certain vagueness in the story, a

vagueness of which Mr. Locsin complains in another connection. Still, if I am right in my reading of the story, the author has managed to convey his meaning sufficiently, and it is a meaning worth conveying. One can go a step further: the father, in trying to teach fear to his son, is really trying to teach fearlessness to himself, that he is not afraid; yet the very need of proving it, is proof that there is a hidden fear—for who can face death, less than a year away, with complete equanimity?

4

“The Doll” by Emigdio Alvarez Enriquez was awarded the third prize. It is the story of a boy who has been brought up wrongly: treated like a girl by his mother, allowed to play with a doll, made to wear long curls. The story is about the boy’s prolonged struggle to assert his manhood, and to achieve final emancipation and maturity.

The theme has rich possibilities, but it is handled clumsily, and, in two spots, offensively. In his struggle to become a man, the boy thinks of becoming a priest, of dedicating his life to the service of the Mother of God. A noble ideal, surely; but not as the boy cherishes it. For in the boy’s heart, this ideal becomes a morbid eroticism (a “thirst”) by which he wants to “marry” the Blessed Virgin.

The boy took a look at the Lady. She was smiling through tears of happiness. Her eyes spilled waters of love, her lips dropped freshets of sweetness. And her cheeks—they were dew-filled calyxes of kindly care. Suddenly, he was seized with a great thirst. His lips felt cracked and his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. An urgent longing to drink possessed him. He felt he should drink, drink, drink—of the Lady’s eyes...

...“Que dicha!” his mother said. “To wed the Mother of God and sing her *glorias* forever. Que dicha!”

This is offensive. Whatever interest that passage might have for students of abnormal psychology, the concept is

highly obnoxious to anyone who has any respect for the Mother of God. And as for this very strange conception of the priesthood, one can only say that if *that* is what the boy meant by being a priest, then his father was quite right in saying that to be a priest is not to be a man.

The ending of the story is stranger still. Thwarted by his father in his desire to become a priest, the young man goes out into the darkness to the wharf, and there finds solace in the arms of a prostitute. He wakes up in the morning disgusted with his partner, but much relieved to find himself at last a man. Mr. Locsin thinks this "a stroke of consummate boldness by the writer". Mr. Castro asks, more pertinently, "... I'd like to know if the boy's private neuroses, his own peculiar Oedipus complex, was resolved, finally, when he found himself bedded with a lot of flesh?"

This story was awarded third prize because it was voted first place by Mr. Locsin, third by Mr. Castro. It received no note from Mr. Yabes. I agree with Mr. Yabes.

5

Which raises two questions of literary criticism: the question of sentimentality; and that of morality.

All three stories are offenders with regard to sentimentality. The least offender is "The Heritage": the boy, sickened by the sight of sickness and physical corruption, finds it hard to drink a Coke. "Drink it," says his father, "Drink it for my sake!"

The judges are quite right in deploring the lack of proportion here between stimulus and response.

Mrs. Tuvera's "The Virgin" is also guilty of sentimentality. In an attempt at stream-of-consciousness writing, the writer gives us this paragraph:

In his hands he held her paper-weight, an old gift from long ago, a heavy, wooden block on which stood, as though poised for flight, an undistinguished, badly done bird. It had come apart recently. The screws beneath the block had

loosened so that lately it had stood upon her desk with one wing tilted unevenly, a miniature eagle or swallow, felled by time before it could spread its wings. She had laughed and laughed that day it had fallen on her desk, plop! "What happened? What happened?" they asked her, beginning to laugh, and she said, caught between amusement and sharp despair, "Someone shot it!" and she laughed and laughed, too, till faces turned and eyebrows rose and she told herself, *whoa, get a hold, a hold, a hold!*

Yes, by all means, get a hold. A woman does not laugh hysterically, much less feel "sharp despair" because a bird on a paper-weight gets unscrewed and falls on the table, plop!

The worst offender with regard to sentimentality is "The Doll". The whole story is overwritten. The boy's reaction on seeing a statue of Our Lady of Fatima can be explained only by abnormal psychology. And the deep despair that seemingly fills this young man's heart on being told by his father that priests are not men, can only be explained in the same way. These are not normal reactions of normal people.

Worst of all is the story's ending. One night with a prostitute, and the complexes of a lifetime vanish, manhood is asserted, maturity is attained. Life is not as easy as all that.

And this brings up the second question: morality. When is a story immoral? Surely, a story is not rendered immoral by the mere mention of an immoral deed: theft, or murder, or adultery. It becomes immoral if evil is presented as good, if immorality is depicted with approval, if it is portrayed as something appealing, desirable, or as the proper solution to a problem. To present an immoral action as the only (or the proper) way out of a difficulty is tantamount to preaching that the end justifies the means—and *that* is immoral.

It is in this last way that "The Doll" is objectionable. Whatever the intentions of the author might have been (and they may have been of the best), objectively, an immoral solution to a problem has been offered. An immoral

action has been presented as the effective way to attain a desired and desirable end.

Finally, there is a point which, if not one of literary criticism, cannot be separated from it. That point is the social impact of the story. Authors do not write or publish in a vacuum. They write and publish in society. If they could take their invention off to some literary Eniwetok, their work would not have to submit to restrictions imposed by their social environment, but could look solely to canons of literary workmanship. But as long as these inventions explode in Plaza Miranda or in the Talipapa Elementary School, the author must have regard for the vulnerability of the bystanders. Who will get hurt? And this is another reason why he may not make evil attractive.

6

Three general observations might be made to conclude this discussion of the state of the Philippine short story in 1952.

First, the short story is here to stay. These three stories (and many others), with all their defects, are well told. The story tellers of our country, given the chance, will not be inferior to those of other countries.

Second, English is here to stay. These stories (and others) are proof that English has long ceased to be a foreign language. It is the language of the school, the courts, the congress, the public documents, the informal party, the formal occasion, the business transactions, and even the street corner meetings. It is the language in which a goodly proportion of our educated people think and write. This is not to say that it is the only language in the Philippines so used. Spanish, despite half a century of intended disuse, has not died out: it is here to stay. And the dialects are here to stay: you cannot stamp out the language which a mother uses to her child, and the ploughman to his neighbor in the field.

Americans are constantly amazed at the facility with which Filipinos handle the language of Britain and America. They do not realize how well they have taught us their tongue. I speak, of course, of those educated *properly* in English-speaking schools. There are still too many students and too many graduates whose English is barbarous, despite years spent in a classroom in which nothing but English was supposed to have been spoken. This is a defect in our educational system, not a sign of our inability to master the English language. There is solid reason to hope that some day, not too far distant, a respectable body of literature will develop, read at home and honored abroad, truly English yet distinctively Filipino. There is an Irish literature in English, and English was not originally native to Ireland. For that matter, English was not native to the United States.

A third observation: The Philippines is predominantly a Christian, a Catholic country. It would be strange, with such a culture, if this Christianity were not reflected in our literature. If it were not, then there would be a dislocation in our culture. Our writers, if they did not reflect our basic philosophy and our basic theological orientation, would not be representative of us. If that were to happen, then our literature would not fully mirror our life or our ideals, our history or our tradition; our literature would be leaving out the most important part of our heritage.



¹ "Renaissance in Many Tongues," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XXXIV (Aug. 4, 1951), 28 ff.