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Political Parables

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Political Parables

CIRILO F. BAUTISTA

THE COUNTRY OF A THOUSAND HORSES

IT WAS a country of a thousand horses, they being ranchers and riders and huntsmen; so, when a horse was elected President, they greeted the news with sobriety and without surprise; and when the President decided to build a palace on top of a hill, they admired him— in fact they would have regarded him as stupid if he did not desire this luxury afforded by his office; and when the President raised taxes to enable him to buy the best materials for the palace, ordering them from foreign lands, they considered him a horse of good taste; but when the President did not invite them to the Grand Ball on the inauguration of the palace, they were furious and demanded his resignation. The President, being well-trained in the intricacies of statecraft, threw them into prison where they were taught the fundamentals of horse-sense. Thus their education began. Thus and thus.

THE POET AND THE TYRANTS

They were tyrants, and since it was the twentieth century, they granted him a last request before his execution. He said, "I am greatly honored by this occasion. I was just an unknown poet when you arrested me and charged me with having killed my land-owner. I denied it, for I did not do it, but you produced brilliant proofs and wove them into a beautiful legal tapestry that I was convinced that I was really the murderer. What could I, a simple poet, do against your collective genius? You so dazzled me with your strong command of language that I wept to see the truth. I

am grateful: whereas before I could not afford one small snapshot, I found my face printed in all the papers, my name taller than my fingers; whereas before nobody read my poems, thousands bought my books. I was homeless, you gave me a home; I was hungry, you fed me; I was unknown, you shouted my name to the four winds; I was innocent, you declared me guilty. So, I am happy to die. Never again will I have to labor over a poem. I am ready." They conferred, nodded, gestured, smiled. They recalled the order of execution, and, since they were tyrants, sentenced him instead to inhabit a twenty-room mansion, attended to by seven servants, and to perform nothing but to write poems for the rest of his life.

THE MIRACLE OF THE TRAINS

The government wanted the poor citizens to forget their hunger, so it commissioned the building of a most modern railroad system in the metropolis. From one point of the city to another, linkages of steel were laid. Automatic, electric, and computerized stations determined schedules, plotted time lapses and loading capabilities. No charges were levied on the poor, so that even though they were hungry, they could ride in the trains for free, forgetting their hunger as they viewed the city rushing past the glass windows of their comfortable compartments, the sun rising or setting behind tall buildings, rich people eating their meals in their dining rooms, beautiful people dancing in nightclubs and cabarets, and ministers of state entertaining their mistresses. These daily train rides became the panacea of the poor, and they forgave their government all its abuses and corruption, all its mismanagement and shortcomings. When the poor died, they died happy with the knowledge that their government cared for them. Those living had no cause for protest or demonstration, for they saw the trains as a manifestation of their government's concern for their welfare. Consequently, the city became a model of peace and order. So successful was the railroad system that foreign delegates from other Third World countries visited the city to acquire a first-hand knowledge of the transportation miracle and to study its application to their own problems. Thus the city became famous all over the world for employing the advances of science and technology in the fight against hunger.

WHAT DOES A WOMAN OWN?

She was an old woman, and a widow. When the drunken military policemen came in the middle of the night, she begged them not to take what she did not own. So they took away her cow, her trinkets, her daughter, killed her two sons, and left her alive.

THE PARROT WHICH DID NOT KNOW HOW TO COUNT

He was a parrot, no doubt about it, but since the Emperor's ministers were of the opinion that he was an economist with a degree from the Dublin School of Finance, the Emperor appointed him Supervisor of the Treasury. Being a parrot, he was a master of imitation. He used, *in toto*, the monetary system of foreign lands which he had studied in school, believing it would work miracles for his country's declining economy. In the first few months of his incumbency, people were impressed by his diligence as the country's top moneyman. This was largely the work of his efficient public relations staff, composed of the country's most clever journalists and lobbyists. Being young, though a parrot, he thought he could do no wrong; but being young, and a parrot, he could not avoid doing wrong. He felt it beneath his dignity to answer his critics who were, by then, already discovering the weaknesses of his financial policies and monetary transactions. For one, they no longer believed him. When he declared that the currency would not be devaluated, it was devaluated the next morning; when he said that the country was in debt for only four hundred million *reales*, it turned out the debt was really six hundred million reales. Everyone blamed him for the mess in the economy, and he in turn, blamed his financial research staff, which was tantamount to blaming himself. He was a victim of an accounting oversight, he averred, while the people, who were starving because of his error, knew they were the victims of some hocus-pocus. He kept parroting the excuse — "I'm a victim of oversight"— whenever he was asked about the matter. The Emperor, when informed of the affair, decided to replace the parrot. Critics considered this a very enlightened move on the part of the Emperor who now saw the parrot for what he was— a parrot. But the Emperor knew his politics; he never made enemies when he could not make friends. So, to preclude the parrot's en-

mity, the Emperor appointed him as Imperial Spokesman, a position which really suited his talent and qualifications.

THE PROPHET

He came with the gifts of wisdom: books, tallows, blank tablets, blood of the bison. And he said to them: "I neither sell nor bargain, but offer these to you. I who am in darkness give you light, who am unschooled give you alphabet, who am awkward give you art, so that in the end you may slay me, lest by these gifts you be slain." They did not understand him, but they accepted the gifts gladly.

THE EMPEROR AND THE FOOLISH WRITERS

Because it was not a country for writers, five poets were dismissed from government service when they wrote about the death of a leader of the opposition party. The Board of Censors for Literature (BCL) found their poems contravening the State ideology, and forthwith placed them under house arrest, confiscated their books, and cut their long hair. To prevent similar occurrences in the future, the Board passed a resolution requiring its prior approval before any literary work could be printed and distributed. At the same time, it established a network of vigilant critics tasked with harrassing, threatening, and frustrating writers known to possess antigovernment convictions and sentiments. When a group of writers demonstrated against these restrictions, the Board, with the help of the Integrated Military Police and the Fire Department, dispersed the crowd with horse-manure pellets and water from the Pasig River. The Emperor, upon recommendation of the Board, signed a decree providing for the confiscation of all typewriters in the country, old and new, working and not, of whatever brand. Writers were required, under pains of imprisonment, to surrender their writing machines. A Ministry for the Care and Supervision of Typewriters (MCST) was formed to centralize the whole operations. It was headed by a retired Army general who had reportedly taken creative writing courses at the State College during his student days. Very much awed by his new position and wanting to prove himself equal to the task, he passed guidelines to safeguard the nation's literary heritage, to wit: anyone

wishing to write anything must first submit to him a conceptual outline, in triplicate; upon its approval, the applicant was loaned a duly registered typewriter to use at minimal cost; his subsequent work was published in the State magazines only after it secured the imprimature of the Literary Screening Committee (LSC), then composed of representatives from the Imperial Constabulary, the Bureau of Internal Revenue, and the Bureau of Coast and Geodetic Survey. Naturally, the committed writers, opposing these rules, went underground. They hid in unexplored caves and mountain crannies, and there wrote their masterpieces using reeds, rooster plumes, tree barks, dried leaves, animal blood, and berry juices. They scribbled what they felt, exercising their illegitimate literary freedom, and always in danger of being discovered. They wrote about their people's sufferings, their government's indifference to the plight of the poor, their bleeding hearts, and God's strange ways with men. They wrote on leaves and tree barks, and since they could not distribute them, they buried them in fields and valleys, hoping that in the future, when things got better, they could dig them out, disseminate them without fear, and let their countrymen read them. They waited and waited, but things did not improve. Fifty years later, tourists and travellers in the country passing through the mountain trails of the North and the valleys of the South were impressed by the number of trees that had grown in these areas, providing a most pleasant sight in a country previously known for its denuded forests. It was said that if you had sharp eyes, you would notice certain inscriptions on the trunks and leaves of these trees, but that was only if you looked very closely, or with magnifying glasses. Then you would make out words and phrases on the trees, follow them up and around the trunks as they formed what appeared to be lines of poetry and paragraphs of novels. But that was possible only if you looked very closely, and if you had a pure heart.

THE GREAT STONE FACE

His ministers told him it was not prudent, but since he was Emperor, his wish prevailed. So they built his Great Stone Face at the junction of two mountain highways. It was five stories high from chin to crown, bigger than the Colossus of Rhodes. One could imagine that had the Emperor desired his full figure sculpture, it

would have taken all of the Cordillera Ranges to construct it. Thirty men worked on the Face for ten years, trying to capture the Emperor's likeness as faithfully as possible. But each year the model's visage changed in accordance with the crises of government he had to confront. One year it looked benevolent, another year inscrutable, then sickly, then angry. Because of this, the sculptors had to chip away what they had previously carved, and start all over again. But with no prospect of finishing the Face, the sculptors, in frustration, abandoned the work on the tenth year. They were promptly imprisoned and replaced. The new artists used a revolutionary plastic substance to mould the Face back into shape. No chipping or carving was necessary; indeed, because it was plastic, it captured the nuances of the shifting visage of the Emperor. In less than a year, the work was finished. So exactly did the sculptors capture the passion and intellect of the Emperor with the revolutionary substance that the Face was almost lifelike, almost alive. It reflected the mood of the Emperor at any time. If he was angry, the Stone Face looked angry; if he was sickly, the Stone Face looked sickly. It was a most fortunate thing for the Emperor's subjects, even for the tourists. If they wanted to know how to behave for the day, all they had to do was observe the expression on the Stone Face and then adjust their thoughts and actions to it accordingly. Thus, unpleasant situations were avoided, and the conduct of the citizenry was properly monitored, through the simple expediency of watching the Great Stone Face looming at the junction of two mountain highways. It soon became a habit for anyone, be he a mere citizen or a government official, to consult the Great Stone Face before embarking on any action or project. Consequently, regular pilgrimages to consult the Great Stone Face were organized, and one could not claim to be a man of any importance unless he had personally seen the Great Stone Face and had his photograph taken in front of it.

THE STORY OF LADY CONTRARY

She was known as The Primal Woman, though her enemies called her Lady Contrary. She was educated in the country's finest nunnery whose principal inculcated in her the Philosophy of Conversion. Its basic tenet was simple, but its application devastated her enemies and detractors: it taught her that the best way to

achieve anything in this world was to do the opposite of what she said. It became the secret of her success as a politician, a government official, and a woman. Thus, she said she was not interested in becoming Supervisor of National Habitation, but accepted the position when it was offered to her the next day by her cousin, who was Prime Minister; she denied she was running for a seat in the Parliament, but led the candidates ticket of her party in the elections; she declared her youngest son would not marry the daughter of a political opponent, but ten days later gave a lavish wedding reception for the couple, complete with thousands of flowers and gallons of wine. Slowly, her enemies and detractors understood the ramification of her philosophy. So they burst into national rejoicing when she announced after a serious nervous breakdown that she was still strong and did not intend to die.

THE ONLY INTELLIGENT MAN IN GOVERNMENT SERVICE

Because his friends told him he was the only intelligent man in government service, he believed it. He was not one to doubt his friends. After all, he occupied several responsible positions in the bureaucracy, making him very rich and very powerful; why then should he not also be the only intelligent man in the service? When he flexed his muscles, as it were, people's fortunes, or misfortunes, were made; when he exercised his intelligence in little hurried essays published in government papers, defending, or praising the qualities of the King he worked for, his friends did not forget to point out to those within hearing distance that he was an essayist par excellence, and they could not understand why he had not yet won the Nobel Prize; when he spoke, his detractors cowered and, depending on the various offences — real or imagined — that they had committed against him they were financially ruined, lost their jobs, or imprisoned. He had a particular aversion to writers whose views differed from his, suspecting them of undermining the stability of the government that he had been serving faithfully for many years. But deep inside him, the real reason was that he did not want any intellectual competition—there had to be only one intelligent man in government service, and that was himself. He believed so much in this that when he spoke for the King, for he was also the King's alter ego, he would

embellish the King's words with his own and pass his own thoughts as the King's. In fact, on certain private occasions when he had taken one drink too many, he indiscreetly decried the King's intellectual shortcomings. He felt it his duty to correct these shortcomings, he said, something that was immediately conveyed to the King by government spies. The King deprived him of all his positions in the government and exiled him to a liquor-producing island in Southern Tagalog. Indeed, the King believed that there had to be only one intelligent man in government service, and that was himself.

THE IMMORTAL EMPEROR

He wanted to be the longest reigning Emperor of the land, so he sent imperial messengers abroad to look for the medicine of immortality. No cost would be spared to get this— he was a rich man— and his messengers were instructed not to return until it was secured. For the truth was, he was sick but did not want to die. He could not imagine himself as anyone other than an Emperor, and the thought of death put him in despair, for he wanted to cling to power and wealth. He had survived two wars, three assassination attempts, and countless betrayals; he himself had caused the assassination of three political enemies, countless betrayals, and imprisonment of detractors. All he needed was immortality to permanentize his achievements. Five years later, his messengers came home, bringing with them the medicine of immortality. He drank the secret concoction, and immediately felt a hundred years younger. Indeed, he became immortal. The older he grew, the more ruthless he became, safe in the knowledge that he could not die. His enemies perished of old age, but he continued to live; generations lived and died, but still he was Emperor. His life, consequently, became monotonous, for, in spite of his power and wealth, there were no more challenges to face and victories to attain. He longed desperately to die. He went around his kingdom offering fabulous rewards to anyone who would kill him, but his people thought it was one of his cunning acts again, so they avoided him and locked their houses. He went from town to town, knocking on his subjects' doors, pleading, "Please, kill me, I want to die." But they pretended not to hear him.

THE MAN WHO COUNTED TOO FAST

He was the Director of the Institute of Numbers, but alas! he forgot how to count. So the President sent him back to the University to re-learn the science of counting. He regained his memory in due time. However, he counted too fast. Try as he could, he was unable to control the mental motor that touched the nerves assigned to numbers. So he counted faster than any living man in the country. During the popular elections for the Parliament, he was appointed as Official Vote Counter. He counted with such speed that even though all the votes had not yet been received, he had already finished summing up the official tallies. Everyone was amazed at his exceptional ability. Being a smart man, and ambitious, he conceived of putting this talent to advantage. He hired himself out to any political party willing to pay for his services, with the guarantee that he would count the votes in the party's favor. Thus, politicians sought his services, but only those with money to meet his price were assured of winning the elections. He became the unofficial ruler of the land, and he lived a long life of wealth and distinction.

HOW TO DRAW A POLITICIAN

It is the easiest thing to draw the picture of a politician. You can never go wrong, whatever materials or techniques you employ. You can start with any color— for instance, red or blue or green or violet or pink— it does not matter, for politicians are known to change colors, like chameleons, at the slightest variation of the political weather. His face, too, can be done in a variety of manners— you can put in four eyes, two noses, three ears— as many as you like, in fact, because the politician is noted for assuming many disguises and likenesses in the course of his career. His creativity and cunning remain a marvel, and scientists have not yet fully explained the reason for his long survival. Perhaps you should give him two mouths also, to indicate his extraordinary duplicity with language. He is the only species of creation which speaks with forked tongue and can hide his true meaning behind a plethora of words, making his constituents miserable and helpless. As for hands, give him four, like the underworld characters in Indian mythology, for he is quick-handed and can dexterously

juggle anything to his advantage— money, contracts, people. He is known to steal from the Treasury, but so far he has not been caught because of his quick-handedness. As for feet, give him five, since he will go even to the depths of Hell if there are any registered voters there. Finally, when you have finished coloring him, fold your drawing into a paper airplane and send it flying through the air. That is the only revenge you can have on a politician.

THE PIG WHO COULD PLAY THE VIOLIN

Just before the cocktail hour, he would amuse himself by playing the sonatas of Beethoven and Borodin. The sounds of his violin would spread in his room, spill under the door, and fly across the fields and valleys of the small town. His neighbors would pause in whatever they were doing and curse under their breath. "It's that pig again," they would mutter. For he was, indeed, a pig who could play the violin. The talent was revealed early to him when, as a suckling pig, he chanced upon an old violin in the barn and tinkered with it the whole afternoon. His mother scolded him but did not otherwise get in the way of his musical inclination. A scholarship at the local university formalized his music education, and at nine he gave his first concert. People did not quite take it against him that he was a pig. After all, he was a prodigy, an excellent violinist. God knows there are many pigs who are not even worth the mud they wallow in! At twenty his reputation was established, and at thirty he was at the peak of his career. At thirty-two he married and started a family. According to reliable reports, he was a dutiful father and a dedicated husband. His neighbors loved him at first, but when he got into the habit of playing sonatas every twilight, they considered him a nuisance, though he played well and the compositions were by Beethoven and Borodin. In brief, his playing intruded into his neighbours' lives: his musical notes assaulted the roses in their gardens, curdled the milk in their iceboxes, hid in their closets when they were making love, and turned on the faucets in their bathrooms when they were away in the supermarkets. No one among them, however, was brave enough to tell the pig to stop his infernal music. Every morning, at seven, the pig who played the violin would wake up whistling, take a shower, put on his uniform, and go to work. He was the town's Chief of Police.

THE MAN WHO WAS SHOT BY NOBODY

It was the strangest murder. A man was shot point-blank in broad daylight, escorted by one thousand soldiers and watched by five thousand well-wishers, and no one saw who fired the gun. But then, so many unusual things had been happening in the land that this occurrence was really not extraordinary. Still, it made one wonder whether he was living in the real world or in the world beyond. As expected, the Emperor proclaimed that the killer was an enemy of the State, one who espoused a destructive ideology. Nevertheless, because he was benevolent and would like the murder thoroughly investigated, he assigned a Special Task Force to gather evidence and unravel the identity of the killer. For two years, the Special Task Force interviewed four hundred witnesses, filled two thousand notebooks with transcripts, and spent a million pesos in the process. At the end of the investigations, the Special Task Force announced its findings: one, all the witnesses agreed on one thing— that they did not see anyone shoot at the victim, since they were all so scared by the sound of gunshot that they temporarily lost the use of their sense of sight; two, the witnesses also seemed to have suffered from temporary amnesia, since none of them could recall with clarity the actual sequence of events that took place before their very presence; three, the victim had many enemies, as evidenced by the fact that he wore a bullet-proof vest; and four, the victim's death profited nobody but, instead, caused a minor economic crisis in the country. In the light of these findings, the Special Task Force concluded that, since evidences did not point to any particular person as the killer of the victim, then the victim must surely have committed suicide.