

philippine studies

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

Reinventing the Past: Cave and Shadows/Mass

Leonard Casper

Philippine Studies vol. 33, no. 2 (1985) 229–235

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 27 13:30:20 2008

Review Article

Reinventing the Past: Cave and Shadows/Mass

LEONARD CASPER

CAVE AND SHADOWS. By Nick Joaquin. Metro Manila: National Book Store, 1983. 272 pages.

MASS. By F. Sionil Jose. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1984. 232 pages.

To survive at all during centuries of Western domination, Filipinos in their homeland had to learn to adapt quickly to foreign ways, and history records how exceptionally well they managed to excel their political masters even while serving them. What history is only now beginning to acknowledge in equal detail is the way that adaptation has sometimes worked in reverse, as well. For example, in *Brown Heritage* (1967) both Fernando Zobel and Leandro Locsin explain how early Spanish architecture—squat, heavy, unventilated—in native hands soon became the imposing but light wooden Antillan residences more appropriate to the tropics. And Resil Mojares, in *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel* (1983), provides example after example of alterations in Hindu, and Muslim, and Spanish literatures under strong nativist influence. This is an insight shared by both Nick Joaquin and F. Sionil Jose in recent novels which more than imply that Filipinos will find their fullest identity not by discarding all crosscultural currents and returning to some primitive precontact state, but by recovering—and adapting to conscientious purpose—all usable pasts, selectively assembled. Their novels are written in the same spirit that moved Ed. C. de Jesus, coeditor of *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations* (1982), to write, “Human beings demonstrate a remarkable capacity for reconciling apparently contradictory motives. It is risky to assume that people see only two sides of a question, or that they necessarily consider two opinions mutually incompatible.”

NICK JOAQUIN

That foreign cultures become Filipinized in the process of being imported and imposed is one of the major themes in Nick Joaquin's *Cave and Shadows* (1983). On the surface this is a conventional mystery, an investigation into a mestiza's death, permeated by "the odor of sanctity," in an old Metro Manila cave. This inner sanctum has been held sacred for centuries as the hermit cell of La Hermana, a Christian recluse who held conversations there with her divine Bridegroom. Since an earthquake uncovered it in 1970, it has been used by a pagan sect headed by Ginoong Ina, a goddess figure who may be a reincarnation of ancient *anitos*. Her cult has prospered until, in its quarrel with Catholics over the use of this holy place, it assumes such political power that the site has been closed entirely. Strong arguments are made by several persons throughout the novel for a return to a paganism that would realign the Filipino with his holy land made superabundant by nature, and that would discard the artifices and intruding irrelevancies of Western colonial culture. One character even goes so far as to say flatly that no Filipino can be a Christian—in spite of the fact that 85 percent of the Philippine people are professed Catholics, and the Philippines is known as the only Christian country in Asia. One may begin to wonder if this is the same author who, for thirty years, has often been identified with Spanish times and values and the Dominican order. Has the need to appear nationalistic forced on Joaquin this regression to naturalism?

Any puzzlement, however, is based on a longstanding misconception: the image of Joaquin as a reverent Hispanophile undoubtedly has been exaggerated out of proportion. Although in the title essay of his 1964 collection, *La Naval de Manila*, he wrote that "there is as great a gulf between the pre-Spanish drift of totem-and-taboo tribes and our present existence as one people as there is between protoplasm and a human creature," he has consistently dramatized the unresolved creative tensions between the sacred and the profane in such stories as "Three Generations" and "Summer Solstice" and *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961), as well as in those articles on faith healing which he once wrote while an editor for the *Philippines Free Press*. In many ways *Cave and Shadows* is a reprise of these earlier speculations.

Mayor Gatmaitan, in the novel, confesses that he caused the death of Nenita Coogan, the girl found in the cave, by accidental asphyxiation in a trunkful of flowers. Yet a deeper mystery emerges, when it is revealed that apparitions of Nenita have continued to reappear after her burial. Yvette, a hospitality girl, was hired to dress like Nenita in order to convince the former husband of Nenita's mother that he is insane and should stop investigating; but Yvette in fact was never able to fulfill those assignments. Is the restless spirit of Nenita Coogan still alive, then? A related question, also unanswerable: is it conceivable that both La Hermana and Ginoong Ina are manifesta-

tions of the same persona, either continuing one another in time or forever coexistent? For Joaquin these seem to be serious considerations, not literary devices intended to provide thrills for the superstitious.

In *Tropical Gothic*, his 1972 collection, Joaquin already prepared for the ambiguous figure of La Hermana with the tale of "Doña Jeronima" and the Archbishop of Manila who regularly, without explanation, visited her cave. The ability of Bobby Heredia, in "Candido's Apocalypse," to strip people visually of their clothes and perceive their inner essence foreshadows the painful candidness of Nenita Coogan who naively assumes that people want their darkest secrets exposed. Similarly the prospect of La Hermana's reincarnation as Gintoong Ina has its origins in "The Order of Melkizedek," whose diabolic/priestly Melchor/Melkizedek is identified with Adam, the Magi, a *colorum* from Pangasinan, and now the carnal Christ. In the same story, the narrator's niece is Steve/Ginny/Gigi/Sister Guia. Clearly, Joaquin has been wrestling with life's ambiguities for many years.

The most persistent theme of *Cave and Shadows*, as the Platonic title suggests, is that nothing is ever quite what it seems to be. Because the action takes place the month before Marcos declared martial law, in part the novel must be read as a concealed indictment of the violation of human rights under "constitutional authoritarianism," where "safe houses" are in fact places of torture, the New Society has seen a transfer from one crony elite to another, and the assassination of Senator Aquino was staged so that an innocent expendable could be killed to mask a military conspiracy. Such duplicities, however, are barely represented in the novel by Mayor Gatmaitan's manipulation of religious zealots and student demonstrations; as well as by the backstage maneuvers of Segovia, the shadowy kingmaker (ghost-writer? technocrat?) The novel's *timely* political application is severely limited.

Its timeless proposition is that folk Catholicism in the Philippines, the mixture of animism and transcendent monotheism, so often belittled as spiritual mongrelization, may turn out to be more properly descriptive of essential spiritual-material interlocks than those imported Western doctrines which, in the past, have sometimes taught the hostile polarization of body and soul. Joaquin seems to be reassuring the reader that his earlier narratives of Christian legend and of pagan lore mark no divisive ambivalence in the writer but were prophetic of this evolving vision: that nothing in the past need be denied, if it can be naturalized. The Filipino has umbilicals connecting him with multiple worlds. Because nothing is wholly imaginary, the future finds relevant potential in all past precedents.

This philosophical position resembles postmodernism's tendency to be inclusive, rather than to exclude. The logic for such openness, in an age of slaughter that otherwise counsels nihilism, derives from "visions of blossoming possibilities based on skepticism turned against itself, so that faith is given

the benefit of man's doubt."¹ But that willing response could even more naturally be assigned to the tradition of tropical exuberance among Filipinos who, like nature itself, abhor the slightest vacuum.

Given these large-minded intentions, however, the choice of Jack Henson as narrator is unclear. That he has been living in relative isolation from Manila's hurly-burly, on an island off Davao does allow for his early confusions and add to the novel's sustained suspense. That he has not seen his old friends, Pocholo Gatmaitan and Alex Manzano, in some time also makes credible his total misinterpretation of their motives. But he seems unduly dispassionate, both in his original reason for searching out the possible murderer of the virtually unknown daughter of his despised former wife, and in his later supposedly intimate relationship with Alex Manzano's wife and sister. The facts are slowly revealed to him, rather than discovered by him; and any mystical speculations seem too profound for his shallowness. There is a kind of cold detachment about him reminiscent of Ernie Rama in *The Bamboo Dancers*, without Jack clearly representing the defective intellectual, as in Gonzalez' novel, or any similar effete type. It does not seem, for example, that Joaquin is criticizing those alleged modern *ilustrados* who distance themselves from their nation's tragedies out of a sense of superiority or a refusal to recognize the relevance of each small corruption which adds to the stench of general decay. (On the novel's dust jacket every part of Joaquin is buried in sand *except* his head.) Events swirl about Jack, yet he is not central to them. Although he is deservedly rejected by Monica Manzano at the end for this lack of deep feeling, his inability to love/care/share is peripheral to the novel's key structure: Joaquin's recurrent recapitulation of history and legend, until they reverberate mythically in an attempt to ritualize mystery rather than resolve it. The past is essential to complete self-knowledge and to the settling of an entire nation's identity crisis; yet some part will always escape us. The present is child of those pasts, yet the momentum of time passing and the overwhelming press of current events maintains that elusive mystery. Who are we? Why are we? Is the Beata² a prefiguration of La Hermana? Did Nenita die or was she taken away in a transport of glory? Does God use even the diabolic Segovia somehow for divine purposes? Such questions in the novel provoke others in the reader: not Am I my brother's keeper? but Am I my brother? In *Cave and Shadows* numerous assertions are made by the various characters, yet the novel's effect is to raise questions. That is well and wisely done.

1. Casper, "Beyond the Mind's Mirage: Tales by Joaquin and Cordero-Fernando," *Philippine Studies* 31 (1983): 88.

2. See Joaquin's play, *The Beatas: A Hymn in Three Stanzas*, in *Tropical Baroque* (1970).

Jack Henson, unfortunately, is curious about these questions but not deeply committed to following them to the outermost limits of the human imagination. Instead at the end he retreats once more to Davao, isolated in his insular home. He refuses to take sides, although the novel as a whole suggests that there is much to be learned by taking *all* sides, to find perhaps their common cause. Among other things, he becomes part of the national problem by his indifference, as does Chedeng Manzano who flies to New York, alone, in order not to stand in the way of her husband's devious political opportunism. Their only son Andre Manzano, the hope of his grandfather as a restorer of moral order, has died in a student demonstration, in August 1972. It is a time for mourning, and omens; not for monuments.

F. SIONIL JOSE

Part of the motive for Pocholo Gatmaitan's ruthless ambition apparently comes from the shame he felt as a suddenly impoverished young man, fallen from wealth. Jose Samson, the narrator of *Mass*, last novel chronologically in his Rosales series, has even more reason than Pocholo to feel betrayed: he was born not only poor but illegitimate. Still, although he feels a persistent appetite for food and sexual satisfaction as means for providing himself with a mask of self-assurance, gradually he grows from private gratification to reconciliation with his dead father and to submission to the cause of national liberation which requires containing his personal will and channeling his energies, under the direction of others. As he begins to understand and accept the imperfections of the past, he can finally dedicate his life to a more perfect future. At no time, in any sense, is Jose Samson able to be a mere bystander, to remain neutral in the way that Jack Henson can.

What drives Jose initially is his need to find his father, in order to complete his own self-image. His sense of impoverishment from feeling defective when deserted by that older face in which he could find his own features mirrored, is greater actually than the other deprivations that he experiences in Pangasinan and later in Tondo. When he discovers that his father was Tony Samson, a suicide, he feels a further shock of rejection; and seems to have to prove his own right to life and to manliness through a series of sexual encounters: with Lucy the maid, Lily the masseuse, Mila a neighbor's mistress, and Betsy his rich "Ramona"—just as later, having been tortured by the Establishment, his first concern after release is to assure himself, in a massage parlor, that he can still have an erection. His maturing comes slowly and erratically. The texture of this novel is hardly lyric, although it has been called that by a Swedish critic; nor would lyricism be appropriate to Jose Samson, who is earthy. Indeed, the weakest part of *Mass* is those excessively drawn out interior monologues. Jose is not mindless, but neither is he supposed to be an intellectual. He is essentially of the earth, the land, one with nature in all its productivity and potential. Even Jose admits that he listens

first to his stomach and gonads and only then to his mind. And it is Jose who says that revolution is action, not contemplation. He is a restless activist in search of direction.

Far from following the doctrinaire intelligentsia, he learns his truth through unquestionable loyalty to other men whom he finds living on the margins of society: Toto and Roger, both orphans; Ka Lucio, a widower and ex-Huk; Father Jess, a priest who has rejected his Visayan family's wealth but perhaps will never be wholly accepted by those in the slums whom he serves; Hortenso, who has given up privileged professorships elsewhere, in order to teach at a university on Recto Ave., where he is needed. Through these persons, Jose grows beyond self-pity and self-concern, to compassion for the struggling. He even considers the possibility that his father (who in the first Rosales novel, *The Pretenders*, did not know that he had left his cousin Emy pregnant and had the misfortune to marry into the Villa family which came to represent all the sins of the elite) killed himself not out of cowardice but in atonement for his errors and as a desperate attempt to reassert his integrity, in stern Ilocano fashion.

Whether Tony Samson's final act was heroic or not ceases to bother his son Jose, who is satisfied at last to have some connection, however tainted, with his grandfather who had once been imprisoned as a *colorum*, and with his great grandfather who first came down from the mountains of the Ilocos to Rosales. "I was part of those who had perished and those who were yet to come," he finally realizes. He is involved in that mix which is mankind's fate and its hope. Jose has had his own imperfections, nor have these all been purged. He has used student organizations for self-advancement; he has used women and declined to commit himself to them in marriage, despite their proposals; he has peddled drugs and played the *toro*, like the commonest hustler. Then how is he any better than Puñeta, the elitist who has infiltrated the opposition ranks in order to reveal their plans and leave them vulnerable to violence; Puñeta whom he finally kills? The difference is that Jose has never betrayed anyone, but sees Puñeta as representing all those Judases who led to the death of Bonifacio, Luna, Del Pilar, and how many other servants of their country just as he holds Puñeta responsible for the deaths of Toto and Ka Lucio.

Furthermore, Jose has learned from his father's mistakes and from his own. He is poor and has lived with the poor and knows that they too, as well as any *ilustrado*, can be quick to exploit the suffering of others. He knows that there are radicals—some of them were at the Diliman barricades—who have no firsthand knowledge of nor real interest in poverty. He knows that a mob can be just as mindless as any solitary *burgis* figure. The masses can become an abstraction: *I am the mass*, he says instead, personalizing the pain and the promise, and at the same time associating it with the ritual sacrifice of the

Mass. The impulse is not to kill, not to die, but to love and to risk losing all for that love. His love for Betsy, his "wife" *en petto*, teaches him what his father, Tony Samson, may have died too young to learn: the poor do not have a monopoly on social outrage; the truth belongs to anyone who knows it, regardless of class or rank. Above all, Jose has risen beyond mere self-identification, to some degree of self-knowledge. The worst enemy may be the one inside us. Unlike his father who saw the devil-figure too exclusively among the permanently rich, Jose—like occasional spokesmen before him in the Rosales series—is most concerned with the children of the oppressed who, in turn, become oppressors out of revenge or forgetfulness. What betrayal could be worse than when one turns on one's own? The happier tradition that Jose subscribes to, he says, is that of the *colorums*/Sakdals/Huks whose struggle for land reform and justice has failed regularly but just as regularly has been renewed.

It has sometimes been said that much of Philippine literature can be read as variations on the search for the true father, one's deepest source. Regardless of the success of that search, one clearly remembers one's mother, the land of one's morning, one's birth.

The illegitimate son of Don Vicente's overseer, in *Tree* (1978), recognizes the social inequities for which his father and the landlordism that he represents are responsible, but despairs rather than moves for reform. The illegitimate son of Don Vicente, in *My Brother, My Executioner* (1979), tries to fight the system unsuccessfully, is confused in his loyalties, and can only wish for his own death when his wife is killed as a result of his dalliance with those who have massacred an entire village. From that village survives the distraught Tia Nena, his mother, who now in *Mass* recovers her courage and plans to return to Rosales in a reaffirmation of the goodness of the land and those whose efforts keep it fertile. In that spirit the illegitimate son of Tony Samson legitimizes life, in a vision even larger than Tia Nena's. Jose knows that the fault of the elite is their tendency to place faction before nation. The opposition must not make the same mistake, by serving the doctrinaire interests of a few while pretending to serve the many.

Jose also knows that violence is not the only instrument of change. It was not his father's self-destruction which has influenced the minds of men, but the book of apocalyptic revelations and imperatives that he has left behind. Similarly, although Jose Samson is last seen heading for the hills, the epigraph to *Mass* is taken from his own work, *Memo to Youth*. He has often wondered if literature lay outside the real world, until he managed to bring that reality back inside. The past therefore still is assured of a future—not in the sword, but in the undying word.