

philippine studies

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

Telic Contemplation as Unburdening

J.M. Francisco, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 28, no. 3 (1980) 363–369

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

Telic Contemplation as Unburdening

JOSE MARIO C. FRANCISCO, S.J.

TELIC CONTEMPLATION: A STUDY OF GRACE IN SEVEN PHILIPPINE WRITERS. By Alfeo G. Nudas, S.J. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1979. xvi + 227 pages.

Like one schooled in classical rhetoric, Fr. Nudas tells us at the very outset what his study hopes to achieve. The opening paragraph of his introduction states:

The first object of this study . . . is to contemplate the presence of grace in the consciousness intentionality of seven Filipino writers. The second object is to introduce telic contemplation as an approach and a technique in literary analysis and studies. (p. 1)

The entire book is then divided accordingly, with chapter three (pp. 40-206) containing the analysis of particular works of the writers, and chapters one (pp. 1-9) and two (pp. 10-39) devoted to the theory of telic contemplation. Chapter four (pp. 207-19) presents the synthesis and conclusions of the study.

Given such a structure, this review has deemed it both appropriate and convenient to organize its remarks around the two focal points of Fr. Nudas' book — the theory and practice of telic contemplation.

The phrase "telic contemplation" is already a mouthful, not to mention the images and feelings that it conjures in someone encountering it for the first time. Thus, to understand what it precisely refers to is no mean feat. Fr. Nudas elucidates the theory of telic contemplation, especially in chapter two, by using concepts derived from Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Bernard Lonergan (who, some claim, is basically Aristotelian). With painstaking care and clarity, he leads the reader through the Aristotelian understanding of *telos*, the Thomistic meaning for existence as distinct from essence, and the Lonerganian description of the four interlocking levels of consciousness. This journey ends at that point when he is able to say what the telic contemplative is supposed to do: "[he] considers every item of the literary piece always in

relation to the telos, for it is the telos that summons, selects, and specifies every part, big or small, down to the last period, of the literary piece and assigns each its moment, time, and place in the literary piece." (p. 39) What in the concrete this task entails is operationalized in the core schema found in pages 33-34.

The path toward understanding telic contemplation that Fr. Nudas has outlined is steep and tedious. In spite of his clever use of examples and diagrams throughout the book, any reader unfamiliar with the vocabulary of metaphysics will find difficulty in catching all the nuances of the critical framework or in following the rigor of logical argumentation in the theory. However, if the reader remains faithful to the end, meaning if he follows the pointers that Fr. Nudas gives, he will be able to see how the different concepts fit within the framework of telic contemplation.

It is not the intent of this review to retrace the theoretical path to telic contemplation. To do so would be to rob the prospective reader of the opportunity to follow the insights of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Lonergan into literary criticism, as Fr. Nudas works them out. This review is instead an attempt to get behind the study, as it were, to see the *why* for telic contemplation.

Put in another way, Kenneth Burke remarked that each author carries within himself a burden, one which he tries to get rid of as he writes and works out his ideas. In order to understand his work then, one needs to discover what his particular burden is, as it provides the key to the structure of his unburdening. It is the above principle of Burke that this review wishes to apply in its discussion of the theory of telic contemplation.

Behind Fr. Nudas' *Telic Contemplation* is a burden of no small consequence. This burden may be expressed in the form of two crucial questions underlying the author's study of telic contemplation: (1) Can there be a viable and systematic approach to literary criticism that is Catholic?, and (2) Can a literary critic take the formal nature of literature seriously and yet escape the sterility of a narrow formalism? Before proceeding to how telic contemplation answers these questions, one needs to explain them briefly.

The key words in the first question are "viable" and "systematic" on the one hand, and "Catholic" on the other; and what is at stake here is their integration. One pole of the dialectic is the *method* of literary criticism, i.e., its concepts, principles, and operating procedures. The other pole involves the *horizon* of literary criticism in terms of what it reveals about man and what it stands for. The dialectical nature of the first question immediately rules out literary criticism which is piously religious or strictly dogmatic.

In an analogous way, the second question rejects an approach to literature which concerns itself exclusively with *how* the literary piece is constructed, as the so-called New Critics do. Neither acceptable is literary criticism which

pays attention only to *what* a literary piece is all about, as it does not take the formal nature of literature seriously. There is then an implied dialectic in the second question between form and matter.

To be sure, both questions which constitute the burden behind the theory of telic contemplation are not new. One may in fact read the history of literary criticism as a continuing search for synthesis of the poles in the dialectic. What differs is how each theoretician arrives at his particular synthesis.

Telic contemplation answers both questions in the affirmative. There can be a viable and systematic approach to literary criticism that is Catholic. Furthermore, this approach takes the formal nature of literature seriously without the strictures of narrow formalism. To justify his answer, Fr. Nudas turns to the Lonerganian description of consciousness.

In his books, *Insight* and *Method in Theology*, Lonergan stresses the intentionality of human consciousness, i.e., man's consciousness is not an aimless stream but has direction and pattern. This dynamic structure is seen as consciousness moves through the four interlocking levels of reality: sense-data, insight, truth, and response. Furthermore, Lonergan affirms the essential connection between this structure of human consciousness and the question of God:

Such is the question of God. . . It rises out of our conscious intentionality, out of the *a priori* structured drive that promotes us from experiencing to the effort to understand, from understanding to the effort to judge truly, from judging to the effort to choose rightly. [*Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), p. 103.]

In the end, this question of God finds its answer in love: "As the question of God is implicit in all our questioning, so being in love with God is the basic fulfillment of our conscious intentionality." (Ibid., p. 105)

The crude statement of some of Lonergan's ideas above is sufficient to indicate why Fr. Nudas uses his understanding of consciousness as the linchpin of telic contemplation. Accepting this Lonerganian understanding, Fr. Nudas then approaches any literary piece as a work of human consciousness. First, there is the consciousness intentionality of the writer, and secondarily those of the characters in the piece — and both being integrally related within the work of art:

But these consciousness intentionalities can be regarded as the consciousness intentionality of the artist (by his gift of negative capability and versatility); they are all "parts" of the literary piece, each of which is being gently guided, from the depths of its own inner freedom, to help in the realization of the telos of the literary piece. All the consciousness within a literary piece are presided over by the creative consciousness of the artist. (p. 30)

With this decisive step, telic contemplation can now use the fourfold dynamic structure of consciousness as a tool for literary criticism. In terms of *method-*

ology, the four levels of reality along which consciousness moves dynamically provide a schema for understanding each character as well as the commanding consciousness in the entire piece. In terms of the wider *horizon* of literary criticism, the underlying intentionality of consciousness toward the question of God reveals a religious presence in the literary work. As Fr. Nudas puts it, "the telic contemplative, seeking to feel the primitive religious force of that word 'contemplation,' deliberately opens himself, destroying all preconceived boundaries of reality and all preconceived sources of light and truth, to the possibility of experiencing and encountering a religious depth or a sacred horizon in the literary piece." (p. 31) Thus is the first question answered: there can be a viable and systematic approach to literary criticism that is Catholic.

The second question which constitutes the burden behind telic contemplation — though related to the dialectic of method and horizon in the first — involves a different dialectic: that of form and matter in a piece of literature. How can a literary critic take form seriously without being a blind formalist? As with the first question, the Lonerganian understanding of consciousness serves as a light at the end of the cul-de-sac.

With a clever twist, the dynamic structure of consciousness is applied here to the workings of the critic's mind. Lonergan's description of this structure holds true not only for the artist and his characters, but also for any reader and critic. As the critic then follows the consciousness intentionalities of the artist and the characters in the piece, his own consciousness intentionality moves along the same levels, until he arrives at the telos of the literary work. Fr. Nudas expresses it in the following way:

Obviously, the insight of the critic should coincide with the insight of the artist or of the literary piece. The insight of the literary piece is its intrinsic end; it is that which unites all the "parts" together, or that to which all the "parts" march; it is the telos; consequently, the critic, seeking that which gives unity to the piece, should normally light on the same insight or intrinsic end or telos. (p. 31)

Understood in this sense, the task of the critic ceases to be mechanistic, since he gains access to the telos through the commanding consciousness intentionality in the literary piece. He now indeed takes the form seriously.

The foregoing discussion has attempted to describe the burden underlying telic contemplation, and to sketch how Lonergan's understanding of consciousness provides the key to the structure of its unburdening. This effort to get behind the theory of telic contemplation has also, hopefully, pointed to the value of Fr. Nudas' theoretical framework.

Telic contemplation as a theory presents itself as an important contribution to literary criticism. While it is true that Fr. Nudas relies heavily on the concepts of Aristotle and Lonergan, he covers new ground by integrating

them into a workable schema for literary studies. This task of integration has not been easy. Reading through chapters one and two, one immediately senses the painstaking scholarship and labor that the task demanded. Anyone of less erudition or courage would have buckled under the task.

What the theory of telic contemplation has done becomes even more valuable if seen within the context of Philippine literary criticism. It is unfortunate that the local literary scene is often a willing victim of literary fads and schools of criticism. At one time, it was the New Critics that reigned supreme; at another, historical studies. Not that one should not open one's critical sensibility to influence. What the present state of affairs reveals is a lack of nerve and rigor to examine the basis of any practical criticism. Thus, the attempt to articulate this basis — as Fr. Nudas undertakes for telic contemplation — is most welcome, to say the least.

The theory of telic contemplation is valuable still for another reason. At the end of his discussion of Gregorio Brillantes' story, "The Distance to Andromeda," Fr. Nudas writes, "an atheist, a deist, and a Catholic have profoundly different sensibilities; consequently, the Catholic, the deist, and the atheist will see and feel the same literary piece differently." (p. 97) It is quite obvious which sensibility is at work in Fr. Nudas' study. Yet he does not allow his "critical prepossessions" to get in the way of his practical criticism. This is already something of a feat, considering the pitfalls of the different varieties of "theological criticism."

As a theory, telic contemplation is non-confessional. It is based on Lonergan's description of human consciousness in general. Whatever one's beliefs are, the dynamism of human consciousness remains the same: sensing, interpreting, verifying, and responding. Telic contemplation can thus be used by a critic of any persuasion. Granting this, it may still be asked whether the approach of telic contemplation is most at home and fruitful within a Catholic sensibility. It may not be an accident that Lonergan and Fr. Nudas are Christians. The question is valid, and while it looks deceptively simple, it involves issues too complex to be discussed here. Nevertheless, the question is too important to be left unsaid. One can only say that it remains to be seen what results the use of telic contemplation within a different sensibility will yield.

One step toward an answer lies in the clarification of the language that telic contemplation uses. Lonergan himself states that there are four realms of meaning related to the different levels of reality: the realms of commonsense, theory, interiority, and transcendence. (*Method*, pp. 81-85.) Telic contemplation, it appears, crisscrosses borders too suddenly as in the following passage:

Obviously, then, *grace* is a unity of many meanings such as charm, beauty, delight, soothing sound of syllables, kindness, mercy. . . The telic contemplative contemplates all of these, dwelling on the first grace of the literary piece and seeing how all the other graces (including God Himself and His

creative presence in the literary piece) achieve their oneness with the first grace and give the piece a delight that has varying depths. (p. 7)

Without questioning that words can be equivocal or that "meaning is use" (as Wittgenstein put it), a greater sensitivity to the different realms of meaning would illuminate the theory of telic contemplation and present it in an even better light.

The theory of telic contemplation, which has occupied the entire discussion till now, is applied to seven Filipino Christian writers in chapter three, which takes up the main bulk of the book. In spite of the proportion, this review can only offer some general remarks because of the nature of this section.

In chapter three, Fr. Nudas uses telic contemplation as his tool for studying some works of Arcellana, Brillantes, de la Costa, N.V.M. Gonzalez, Joaquin, Bienvenido Santos, and Edilberto Tiempo. A total of eight short stories, one play, two short essays, and four novels are discussed one after another. Here Fr. Nudas combines fidelity with his critical framework with utmost respect for the literary piece in all its intricacy. Here the theoretician has given way to the teacher-critic.

As a result of this shift, the most profitable way of going through chapter three would be to have the original pieces at hand. One can thus follow Fr. Nudas as he "considers with continued attention" the literary work before him: first pointing to the consciousness intentionality of this or that character, then discussing the rhythm of a crucial passage, until the telos finally discloses itself. In this way, Fr. Nudas leads the reader to a telic contemplation of each literary work.

Where each contemplation leads to varies from piece to piece, and the assessment of what each has accomplished will have to be done by the reader. It appears weakest, though, in its discussion of Brillantes' "Faith, Love, Time, and Dr. Lazaro," where the telic contemplation went farther than was warranted by the story. It is most successful in its study of the four novels, especially *A Season of Grace*.

The "steady regarding" of the focal consciousness intentionality in this great work by N.V.M. Gonzalez points to the central insight of the novel in a way other critics have been unable to do. It is true that telic contemplation still uses common tools of criticism such as topic, character, and diction; and some may object to this as a weakness. However, as a critical tool, the four regions of consciousness intentionality make the movement toward Doro's insight that "all men must try" inevitable. That it has done so shows that telic contemplation has pried Gonzalez' work open. It has proven its usefulness.

One closes Fr. Nudas' book with the fear that the phrase "telic contemplation" will just remain there. Because of the unfamiliarity of its theoretical heritage, and the intricacy of its practical application, it is liable to scare read-

ers away. One wishes though that it will be read, used, and even mis-used. One wishes that it will enter into dialogue with other forms of literary criticism, especially with the neo-Marxism employed in vernacular literature. One wishes that one's fears are ungrounded.