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Double Jeopardy, by Reyes

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Book Reviews and Notes



Double Jeopardy. By Gracianus R. Reyes and Antonio M. Allego. Quezon City. New Day Publishers, 1991. vii, 97 pages.

The introduction to *Double Jeopardy* says that the idea of combining the short stories of Gracianus R. Reyes and Antonio Allego first surfaced a half dozen years ago in a moment of jest. New Day publisher Gloria Rodriguez made the suggestion in "somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion" (p. iii) and Tony Allego and Gras Reyes thought about it for a while and then said "Why not?" The tandem is an unlikely combination and there is no real reason at all for combining the two in a single volume beyond the humor of the incongruence. The unlooked-for advantage is that the stories of these two authors, all but two previously unpublished, are now available.

Antonio M. Allego

Antonio M. Allego is the older of the pair of writers included in this collection. The cover blurb describes him as "hale and hearty at 83." He was first published in Manila magazines and newspapers in the 1920s. He worked for several newspapers, and was for some time an executive of the Philippine Iron Mines in Camarines Norte, which was managed by Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific. For twenty years Allego worked as an editor in the legislative branch of the Philippine Government. His short story "Flight" was published by Alfredo E. Litiatco in the *Graphic* in 1940, perhaps, Gracianus Reyes suggests, as part of the Litiatco-Rotor debate over "Art for Art's Sake." Allego quotes the American novelist and critic, Frank Harris: "I am not inclined to lay much stress on mere verbal excellence; a conception may be as great in sandstone as in marble, in putty or in bronze. Of course, I prefer the marble and the bronze to sand and putty, but the conception is, after all, the chief thing." In other words, Allego says, "the story's what really counts."

It is clear, therefore, that Allego uses "story" in its simplest form in this collection (and in all his "stories"). In its broadest sense, "a story is any account, written or oral or in the mind, true or imaginary, of actions in a time sequence. The one merit of a story as a story is to make us want to know what happened next. In the broad sense it is time and time only that

is the determinant of selection—this happened, and then this and then this, and now what? Other higher concerns—plot, theme, character, etc. do not enter story as story.” (Thrall and Hibbard, s.v.) Story is the basis of all dramatic and narrative genres. E.M. Forster insists that the only common element among novels, romances, short stories, dramas, epic poems, allegories, parables, sketches and all other forms with a basis in a sequence of events is the story. Story in this sense is not the plot, but an ingredient of plot.

Only two of Allego's stories are more than a page or two in length. They are "A Matter of Regret" and "A Stitch in Time." "A Matter of Regret," the longest of the Allego contributions (10 pages) is a rather plaintive account of the exile of Conrado Diamante to the leper colony of Cullion in 1917 and the author's (one suspects this is an autobiographical story) regrets in 1973 (fifty-six years after the event) that he had not done more than he did to protect Conrado from alienation, exile, hospitalization and eventual death in Cullion.

I tried to cast Conrado Diamante out of my mind but I couldn't, not for long. A defect of mine, which may be congenital, is easily falling prey to irrationality or something of the kind. Since my last glimpse of Conrado, I have at times entertained the childish notion, despite my supposedly acquired wisdom, that I should have helped in some way, but didn't, thus suffering from a guilty conscience for practically a life time. Because of this, some young people of my acquaintance insinuate that I am losing my wits. I don't think so. I must try harder to forget Conrado Diamante, of course, but I'm afraid that to the end of my days his overwhelming misfortune will haunt me. (pp. 70-71)

"A Stitch in Time," the other longer story (8 pages) in Allego's half of the collection is, for my money, the best of Allego's stories collected here. It is a pregnant dialogue between a husband and a wife. Mel, at 32, married Annabella Dy, the 22 year-old daughter of a rich Chinaman. "Don't call him Chinaman," Annabella says, "He was born in San Fernando" (p. 79). Under the apparently simple dialogue between husband and wife (much like the soliloquies of Browning) lies the plot of the story and the basic question: "Is she playing around, or is she not?" She has every reason to. She is ten years younger than her husband. Her grandfather is supporting them. Her husband has demanded that she give up her career and her Ph.D. She's bored as a housewife. She finds men attractive. "Mel Castro surveyed Annabella's fine features like a painter in the process of transferring them to canvas. 'You are attractive enough without being charitable or kind,' he said, taking hold of Annabella's cigarette stump and grinding its glowing end against the bottom of the ashtray. In the same manner, he disposed of his own. (The symbolism is quite apt!) 'Stop being too kind, too accommodating to men,' he said" (p. 80).

The remaining Allego stories are quite brief and are mostly folk tales. "Sylvan Sorcery" is a simple retelling of a local folktale. "My mother, an inveterate teller of tales, used to tell me: When you are alone in the woods and you hear an invisible baby crying in a tree, tell the equally invisible parents that you want to be its godfather" (p. 72). "Rafael 'Argosy' Ramas" is also autobiographical and seems to be a simple framework for Allego's retelling of the folktale of the origin of the flat nose of the Filipinos.

"The Ridiculous No Smoking Syndrome" could also be called a modern folk tale. It is obvious self justification for a habitual smoker. "He could admit, and did, that smoking was not a virtue—for most people anyway. But he questioned the motives behind giving up the habit: to run no risk of having cancer of the throat or lungs. It implied trying to live forever, which was foolish" (p. 86). The main character, obviously(?) Allego, writes in his newspaper column: "The people who steer clear of smoking so as to avoid death from cancer and the people who clamor for the abolition of nuclear weapons in order to escape wholesale annihilation—all these poor earthlings are in the same boat. The common denominator, the bottom line, of their vaporings is fear of death. Ridiculous. As if in a world cleared of cigarettes and atom bombs they could live forever and a day" (p. 88). The ironic twist at the end of the story, which seems to have been the whole purpose behind this modern folk tale, is that the two companions who gave up smoking have died—Noli of a heart attack in his sleep, and Art in a collision on EDSA near Shaw—while the author (Allego?), who did not give up smoking, remains alive to write about them.

"The Two Sides of the Coin" is also a folk tale. "To be envious is not only reprehensible. It was once punished as a major crime. And the story about to unfold would seem to corroborate this statement" (p. 90). Juana was known as the town idiot. Compounding her idiocy was her ugliness. One day she meets a mysterious woman in the forest who tells her to break all her dishes. But Juana says, "Why not wash them instead?" and wins the approval of the mysterious and beautiful fairy godmother. "You are a wise child. You will not be ugly anymore" (p. 91). The cycle of folk tale justice is complete when Luisa, mistress of Juana and the prettiest girl in town, becomes envious of Juana's good fortune (and good looks!) and encounters the same mysterious fairy godmother. But Luisa breaks the dishes as commanded and becomes the ugliest woman in the world. There are obvious lessons here about wisdom and ugliness as well as the dangers of envy. Be happy with what you are. You could be worse!

"Turnabout" is hard to describe. I must confess I see no point to it beyond collecting the poetry of Andy Abarca whom Allego met in Cebu in 1933. The story (if that is what it is) allows Gallego to pay a debt. The poet he criticized in 1933 may now be praised. That perhaps is the "turnabout" of the title. Or is "turnabout" once again the guilty conscience of the author that prompts him to reevaluate the poetry of an old friend?

Gracianus R. Reyes

Gracianus R. Reyes was educated at St. Louis (before it was a University) in Baguio. After college he studied with the Jesuits for a year at San Jose Seminary, at St. Francis Seminary in Baguio and at San Carlos Seminary in Makati. He taught at St. Joseph Seminary in Dumaguete and then took up graduate studies in Sociology and Economics at the Asian Social Institute. He worked as a community development worker and taught at La Salle and at St. Scholastica's College. In 1986 he left for the US where he edited a Filipino paper in Los Angeles. He returned to the Philippines in 1988 and resumed writing fiction.

All Reyes's stories in this collection are morality tales. He writes like a "moraliste." He states a theme, illustrates it and then moralizes. Like his hero, Drokoy, in the story of that title, Reyes is the eternal questioner, always asking why? The question, often posed in the persona of an innocent/naive reflector on life, or of a child—the perennial symbol of innocence—reveals the inconsistencies in the human condition.

"Karod's Dream World" is perhaps best illustrative of the Reyes style. Kardo is the innocent and Eden is symbolized by the world described by his grandmother. "If there were any chance to go back to the world that his grandmother used to tell him about when he was a child, he (Kardo) would shed every drop of blood to take it." It meant "going back to his childhood, to the time when everything seemed to point to a bright future, when the world of the adult was something children envied and looked forward to, but also going back to a world that his grandmother knew when she herself was young and innocent" (p. 22). Kardo is the innocent, his grandmother is the symbol of Eden. "When his grandmother died, something died in the world that Kardo could never recover" (pp. 26-27). The story reinforces the conviction that "the world could never go back to its innocence" (p. 27).

"The Car" uses a similar framework. Popoy, the innocent child, is confronted with the adult reality of "the car" which brings the "middle aged man, flabby and irascible" (p. 54) to Nardo's mother. "Don't ask too many questions, son," Aling Maria cut him short. "You won't understand" (p. 57). The acceptance in faith of the innocent is one of the major themes of Reyes. In the face of inconsistency, don't ask questions. You will never understand.

"Vida's Marina" reverses the theme of the innocent child. The story rather pathetically tells how Vida loses his eight-year-old daughter Marina. Vida (life!) is clearly a symbol of modern man who has lost his innocence in the modern world and seeks to recover it once again but continually fails. Hipolito Vida "worked as a carpenter, earning P50 a day, in a furniture shop specializing in rattan craft. He had started as a peon; when he graduated into a full-fledged furniture maker, he married a cigarette vendor by whom he had Marina . . . He was heartbroken when his wife died in childbirth"

(p. 45). He takes care of his eight-year-old daughter, but one day she disappears. "When Hipolito Vida woke up the following morning, Marina was not beside him. He rose quickly and looked for her, but she was nowhere to be found. He ran out to the neighborhood asking if anybody had seen her. Nobody could give him answers he wanted to hear. The neighbors murmured: She must have run away. He often spanks her, that's why" (pp. 50-51). The story ends rather dramatically with Hipolito joining a protest march, but protesting not political or social inequities but the loss of Marina—the loss of innocence. "Vida's Marina" has great possibilities, but it is shaped in sandstone rather than in marble, in putty rather than in bronze. The conception is magnificent, but the execution suffers.

"Drokoy" uses the peasant farmer in place of the childish innocent as implicit commentator upon the human foibles of the world. "Farmer Drokoy had many questions in his mind to which he could not find answers" (p. 28). The symbol of evil in Eden in this story is the man who steals the mangos from Drokoy's tree when he and his wife are out working on the farm. "At lunchtime Boy and Carmen talked about the man who had stolen the mangos. Drokoy said once more that they should forget about it. But the question arose in his mind: Why do some people want to harvest something when they don't want to plant anything? (p. 30). The point of the parable is that Drokoy starts to plant mango trees all over the barrio so that there will be so many mango trees that no one will ever have to steal mangos anymore. "In less than a decade the barrio of Katakataka began to look very green. In less than two decades, mango trees covered the entire barrio. Neighboring barrios wondered how it had happened. Before that, trees were very few. The only big tree before was Drokoy's old mango tree from which many picked without asking permission" (p. 34). The Eden story goes on—much like a story of salvation. Drokoy's children grow up and marry. "Boy married a neighbor's daughter and Carmen likewise married a neighbor's son. Drokoy and Maria had grown old together and Drokoy still asked questions that he found no answers to: Why grow old? Why die? Why can't one live forever like the mango tree in our yard that my great-great grandfather had planted a long time ago?" (p. 34).

Three other Reyes stories preach political or moral sermons. *Claro's Ambition* is about foreign domination of the Filipino. "Watching events with dismay and mounting alarm, Claro Maslang often told himself, "We're surely going to lose this country of ours to the foreigners" (p. 35). The story ends with the symbolic/real slaying of the foreigner who has dominated the poor Filipino. "Late that night, Claro slipped out of the house and surreptitiously entered the hotel. The following day, the man in the white raiment was found dead in his bed. "Obviously it was a heart attack," said the hotel manager when interviewed by newsmen. . . . The hotel's image and reputation had to be protected, and clients, too, and their respective coun-

tries had to be spared from embarrassing situations. So it was reported that the man in the white raiment had died of a heart attack" (p. 42).

"The J and P. Enterprise" is almost biblical in its conception—the idyllic story of two brothers spoiled by the presence of Eve and the serpent in the garden. "Linda had regained her former beauty. She swayed her sensuous body as she used to when she was young and unmarried. In her middle thirties now and still childless, she moved about like a pollyanna" (p. 19). "It takes only one or the other to make the first move, and everything will follow easily. The slimy devil knows when to take advantage of a situation. And he now whispered in Linda's ear" "Wouldn't it be nice to have a child with curly hair, very fair-complexioned, perhaps, with freckles just like some lovable kids you see in the movies? Linda smiled and the priest smiled back at her. She stood up and the priest came towards her" (p. 20).

Perhaps the best of the trilogy of political-social sermons is "Lac et Mel," which is a social commentary about Filipinos who abandon their country for foreign shores. Restituto Frutisimo leaves the Philippines for the US—the land of "milk and honey." He hints at the reasons for leaving the Philippines as he tells the story of his journey to Los Angeles. He had flown Northwest rather than PAL because PAL was not very good—always late, poor service, stewardesses exhibiting colonial mentality by paying more attention to foreigners than to Filipinos, the lack of safety and the preferential ticketing that gave priority to those in power or who had prominent and influential friends (pp. 3-4). Toto (Restituto) talks about the system of Philippine bribery, the efficiency of the traffic in a foreign country when compared to the chaos of traffic in the Philippines, Filipinos who go TNT (illegally hiding in the US). There are reasons enough hinted at in the story for Toto (and others) to seek the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey rather than remain in the deserts of their own homeland. In the US, however, Toto finds things are not as good as they seemed." He made the acquaintance of several Filipinos whose life did not measure up to the expectation of their friends back in the Philippines, Filipinos who suffered and longed to be liberated from their difficulties . . . and their shame. . . . a lot of them were frustrated persons" (pp. 10-11). Disillusioned, Toto decides to return home. "The land of milk and honey is as dead as the Latin language" (p. 11). Reyes's sermon is obvious. We do foolish things for foolish reasons. The Garden of Eden always has a serpent.

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