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Twice Blessed, by Rosca

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Pearl culturists introduce a foreign matter into the innards of an oyster to produce a cultured, yet expensive, pearl. Perhaps, in like manner, Tinio, in this translation of *Hamlet*, has metaphorically transplanted foreign matter into the very heart of our culture, our language. In the process of translating, in the process of "breaking down" this foreign matter so that it can "fit in" our culture today, a valuable piece of literature has been created. Such is the nature of Shakespeare's works. They may be transplanted into another culture, into another time, and be transformed into something even more valuable, because they shed light on the collective experiences of another people.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark has been translated into our own language. It is something foreign that has been rendered our own through *Ang Trahedya ni Hamlet, Prinsipe ng Dinamarka*: something definitely from Shakespeare's literary gift and yet something uniquely from one of our literary talents, Rolando S. Tinio.

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Twice Blessed. By Ninotchka Rosca. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992. 269 pages.

In an author's note to *The Monsoon Collection* (1983), Ninotchka Rosca writes that while individual stories were composed at various places and times, "the collection itself, as a whole, was conceptualized in the Camp Crame Detention Centre in 1973." Much the same thing could be said of Rosca's work, "as a whole": while *The Monsoon Collection*, an earlier volume of stories, *Bitter Country* (1970), the nonfictional *Endgame* (1987), and her first novel, *State of War* (1988), differ from one another in various ways, all are centrally concerned with the experience of the Marcos era and the Martial Law period within it. Now in a recently published second novel, *Twice Blessed*, she takes up the same basic subject, but treats it in a significantly new manner.

The protagonists of this novel, the Basbas twins Hector and Katerina, are, in spite of their blood kinship, instantly recognizable as Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. Not only does the suggestion of incest imply a conjugal relationship between them; individually they possess many of the signature characteristics of the real-life figures, from a passion for shoes, in Katerina's case, to having placed first in the bar exams, in Hector's. Thinly disguised events and personalities from the history of the regime complete the identification in this *roman* of many *cléfs*. The time setting is somewhat unusual:

1965, after the Marcos (Basbas) victory in the presidential election, but before Hector could take office, the election results having been challenged and the country thrown into turmoil by a (purely fictional) maneuver on the part of the incumbent.

Stylistically, *Twice Blessed* exhibits marked continuities, and also certain indications of development and change, with respect to Rosca's earlier work. The favored rhetorical mode here is, of course, hyperbole: situations and emotions routinely run to extremes; characters lacking grotesque personality tics have been scrupulously excluded from the book. The superb grasp of Filipino life and customs that distinguished especially *State of War* adds to the density of this novel as well, although occasionally ethnographic observation escapes the boundaries of the story, subjecting the reader to what are in effect passages of travelogue or, alternatively, mini-essays in cultural criticism. By way of further continuity, there is the familiar acrobatic prose—familiar, but capable of producing fresh effects.

Consider, for example, "mushroom-pale shanties of desperation sprout[ing] with breathless fecundity," (p. 83) as a metaphor for the growth of squatter areas in the metropolis. As for changes, the Latin-American-style magical realism so conspicuous in *State of War* seems to have been reined in somewhat this time out. The new fiction is also leaner, and more linear, in its story line, and notable for a certain pithy acuity not highly developed heretofore. An observation such as ". . . Valero's [beauty] parlor was a disguised communications center. Information walked in and out of its doors, hand in hand with gossip, rumor, and speculation" (p. 59) would have seemed jarringly precise, a miniaturist's detail amidst the sweeping brush strokes in which the workings of power in Philippine society have been depicted in Rosca's previous work.

In matters of substance, too, in particular the attitude taken toward power in the Marcos/Martial Law period, *Twice Blessed* exhibits both continuities and departures, the latter perhaps the more notable. Certainly the novel carries over much of the partisan, negative (to put it in the mildest terms) portrayal of the Marcoses found in *State of War* and the journalistic *Endgame*. American commentary to date has focused on this aspect of the book, describing it as a "satire" or "black comedy," and characterizing the two principal characters as "monsters" who, "tragically for the country they seek to lead, [are] decidedly insane." And it is true that the Basbas twins are scheming, vengeful, ruthless, increasingly cut off from the realities of Philippine life, and increasingly "insane," in the peculiar form of insanity that is political megalomania. Yet it is only toward the end of the novel that these flaws become clearly and overwhelmingly damning, and that premonitions of the "nightmare" (p. 269) of Martial Law begin to reverberate like the boomings of a waterfall ahead in the stream of time. The picture of Hector and Katerina that emerges over the earlier sections, and that cannot be to-

tally effaced by the eventual demonization, is a more complex, more sympathetic, even a more admiring one.

What are the features, then, of this more favorable portrait? To begin with, the twins, about to lay waste to the country, are presented as having been victims themselves, of the circumstances of their upbringing and the workings of their culture. This view appears to have its origin in one of the few understanding assessments found in Rosca's earlier writing, a remark in *Endgame* to the effect that Imelda Romualdez Marcos "was a product of the country's inexorable caste system that had ostracized her when she and her family had been poor, thus . . . ignit[ing] the vengeful obsession with wealth with which she later swindled the country" (*Endgame*, p. 185). As children, the Basbases had been orphans and poor relations, and early on in the narrative Katerina is shown grieving for the death of their parents and for the cruel and demeaning treatment they had received at the hands of other members of the clan. In a somewhat similar vein, it is said of Hector that his ordinariness and simplicity are "the stuff of his personal tragedy, because he lived in a country of compromise. The more he was forced to bend . . . the blacker the vengeance he swore to extract" (p. 137).

But the two are more than psychologically deformed victims; they possess strong positive qualities as well. Passion is one of these: the man Katerina has married values her because, in spite of her many faults, she "is capable of real emotions" (p. 108); Hector is described as "one who could love deeply." They are also creatures of heroic will, demonstrated at this early moment in the stalled campaign:

Only then did they realize how the fight had drained, was draining them; how Hector kept himself and them together by the sheer force of his will. They looked at him, he looked at them, and Teresa felt the circle lock into place. This was the world now and all outside was illusion (p. 77).

Later it will be Katerina's turn to keep the enterprise moving forward, when she steps in to fill the candidacy of the missing and presumed dead Hector. Needless to say, this appropriation of the heroic mantle of Cory Aquino to a character clearly identified with Imelda Marcos comes as a surprise, and it constitutes the novel's single most stunning revision of the latter's image.

Finally, the twins possess a measure of cultural authenticity, defined in terms of the indigenous folk culture of the Philippines. In *State of War*, the halo of this culture shines exclusively around the Resistance; it is the leftist guerrillas and their sympathizers, not the forces of the regime, who draw strength from the people and from the presumably purest roots of Filipino collective life. In this novel, however, both Katerina and Hector are shown to be in contact, to greater or less extent, with those roots. Katerina has as a young adult sojourned for a year in her country, immersing herself in its

grittiest realities; later, at a moment of crisis, she takes inspiration from street children she has seen, able to survive the most desperate odds. Hector, for his part, seems even more organically connected. A "true child of the archipelago" (pp. 207, 215), he finds his deepest sources of wisdom and personal power in a belief in the "barbaric" spirits of the "pre-Hispanic underworld" (p. 183).

One further indication that *Twice Blessed* does something more than satirize the Marcoses' excesses takes a less direct form, but is worth considering for the key it may hold to the larger shift in attitude evident from work earlier than this. Katerina and Hector elicit extraordinary loyalty from a number of subordinates, among them the character of Teresa Tikloptuhod. Teresa is an important figure here, almost a co-protagonist with the two twins and the novel's main center of narrative consciousness. Moreover, while as the daughter of a provincial governor she comes from a privileged background, the cigar-puffing Teresa, living as Mabini did in a native house in the heart of the metropolis, holds solidly authentic cultural credentials. In addition, as the writer within the Basbas organization (not to mention the maker of a joke on the "postmodern" [p. 73] that sails over the heads of her 1960s contemporaries), she may represent some manner of authorial presence in the book. That a character of such substance serves the twins so loyally and resourcefully makes it still more difficult to dismiss them as "insane," merely frivolous, or hopelessly out of touch with their country and its culture. Nor, despite the last name which may suggest a trait of subservience on her part, is Teresa attached to her patrons solely by reason of personal weakness. She has the wherewithal, and does not lack the inclination, to leave. Indeed, at one point near the end of the novel, after Hector and Katerina have entered well into their final, destructive turn, she weighs the option of cutting and running (and betraying the organization into the bargain). But what in the end persuades her to stay is this consideration of her relation to the Basbases: "Without the twins," she told San Custodio a little sheepishly, "my life would not have been as colorful. Between being dull and being evil—it's not much of a choice, no?" (p. 246).

It is an intriguing assessment. Might it reflect as well on Teresa's creator? Has Rosca, not unlike the journalist this reviewer once overheard to confess, "sheepishly" enough, to missing Imelda's dependably newsworthy presence on the Philippine scene, remained loyal to the era of the Marcoses as a subject because of its and their "colorful" qualities? Has the same motive played into the subtly altered—call it nostalgic?—treatment the subject receives in this novel?

Of course, neither that journalist nor Teresa Tikloptuhod can be made to speak directly for Ninotchka Rosca on this point. Granted, too, that whatever the motives behind it, the choice of a subject matter and/or manner of treatment falls within an author's prerogative. Certainly Rosca is not alone in her preoccupation with the Marcos/Martial Law period. A veritable

school of Filipino writers has arisen to address the phenomenon, not, presumably, for its perverse glamor and ready audience appeal alone, but because it was a searing historical experience that affected their lives, in some cases quite directly, as the circumstances of the *Monsoon Collection's* composition suggest.

What's more, whether one agrees or not with the direction in which it revises Rosca's previous fictional estimate of the Marcoses, the more nuanced and even ambivalent portrayal found in *Twice Blessed* is welcome as a step toward a fuller literary and cultural reckoning with a historical legacy surely as complex as it is controversial. Still, the hope may be allowed that Filipino writers—the gifted fictionist under review perhaps among them—will not continue to reckon with that legacy at the expense of attention to the more recent past and the present. In the experience of a slow, unglamorous, often uncertain, but critically important transition from authoritarian rule, there are sure to be subjects which, while they may be no more "colorful" in themselves than the latest brownout, will nonetheless reflect vividly on the process Rosca's largely unstated yet ultimate focus in *Twice Blessed*, of "a nation struggling to be born" (p. 257).

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Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines. By H.W. Brands. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. xii, 384 pages.

Historical studies are often so crammed with elaborate details that they make for boring reading. One has to go through thickets before one can see the forest.

This book is a delightful exception. It is full of details and information which are expertly woven together under vivid, sometimes "punny" subtitles such as "Manic Depression," "Dewey or Don't We?," "The Datu and the Proconsul," etc. The book is an engaging tale of the bittersweet history involving the rise of the United States as an imperial power in the Pacific. And for better or for worse, the author asserts, Filipinos have felt the American impact more directly than most other people. Nine decades of Philippine-American relations provide for historians and social scientists "samples of history that exhibit general tendencies in concentrated form," similar to "particular instances under heightened temperature and pressure" that chemists encounter when they study certain classes of reactions.

The main value of the book lies in its extensive use of primary archival material and manuscript collections, many of which have not been tapped