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Flowers on Fire, by Mendes

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But he clarifies that the intent was always the same: to ask those questions which he thinks have not been asked about history and culture. This Preface must be taken as the frame through which to view this collection, lest the reader find himself unable to accept the many generalizations that Joaquin blithely presents even as he assumes the role of an anthropologist, a sociologist, a historian, a philosopher and a moralist. Compounding the difficulty is the style that the writer employs to shape his arguments. A magician who deftly uses words to argue and, as importantly, to suggest, Joaquin manipulates language to convey his ideas unequivocally. In offering his interpretations, he summons forth the resources of a fictional discourse; thus the reader ends up with narratives on the process of becoming. In the final analysis, what Joaquin does is to problematize certain taken-for-granted notions on history and culture. Many readers, not to say a number of historians, will entertain doubts about his conclusions, about the dearth of research materials, or perhaps even about his definitions of culture and history.

Nonetheless, this collection remains significant mainly because it has attempted to present a series of arguments that question certain canonized views of history. The volume thus becomes one of the many interpretations/reconstructions of recalcitrant reality and the complex process that have shaped both our culture and our history.

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FLOWERS ON FIRE IN THE PHILIPPINES. By Helvecio Mendes.
 Quezon City: Claretian Publications (Philippine edition), n.d. xii, 79 pages.

To many a modern cynic/critic, the genre of religious poetry is an anachronism. Too often these days, what passes for art borders, or even embraces, the profane, the lewd, the transient and the trite. Religious poetry is looked upon as incomprehensible issuances which are moving at most, yes, but much removed from day to day realities.

Helvecio Mendes' "Flowers on Fire . . ." is without a doubt, a collection of religious poetry. These works, however, far from being remote, are as close to the human situation as they can get. The poems are raw and visceral while never losing their focus on the spiritual. In the words of Robert Frost, the poems of Mendes spring from ". . . the soul's ethereal into the material."

Each of the poems in "Flowers on Fire . . ." is a prayer. The poems laud, lambast, express gratitude and grief. And except for the times Mendes resorts to labels more befitting a protest placard (for instance, there is the alliterative but otherwise impotent and unpoetic "international imperialism"), his poems sing. Mendes keeps alive the tradition of the Psalms and Lamentations and the daily prayers one recites most often, halfheartedly, without much thought on what the words evoke. Mendes makes us listen to these familiar words again, by the power of his own rendition.

In "The Messiah's Mission," Isaiah's prophetic words which Jesus used as his own before an astounded temple audience are incorporated by Mendes:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . .

I have not come to bring peace,
But a sword.

Mendes expresses his frustration with the current Philippine situation, depicting a dismal picture not far different from Biblical days where there existed:

The entire apparatus
Of oppression
Exploitation
Brutality
And outright theft
Built on the ruins
Of our flesh
Which cry out.

In this poem, just as Jesus espoused a change of heart, Mendes stirs the complacent into action. Does this action call for a radical response? In the poem, the term "man of peace" emerges again and again. "Come, man of peace." This line is not only an invocation, it is an appeal for sobriety in the face of distressing occurrences which may tempt the more rash among us to cry out for bloodletting retaliation.

The events Mendes describes are indeed distressing. Mendes is a witness to the grisliest moments when man turns against his fellowman. In "Torture I" and "Torture II," the horrors endured by prisoners are detailed precisely, even clinically. But the victims of Mendes' poems are never treated as mere statistics on a police report. Mendes knows each suffering stranger as intimate associate; every victim's pain is his own.

There are three priests "mercilessly gunned down in Benguet." The innumerable Pedros and Pablos in "Hail Peter and Paul" who, following the paths of their namesakes, were killed for their beliefs. And there are those "who survived." Elvie and Bayani. A child born in prison. A widow grieving somewhere in Mindanao. Mendes mourns each loss of life, each survivor's continuing suffering. He cries out against the prevailing and predatory system of injustice. And he seeks solutions.

We have been working
In the same street
Of life
To explore
How and
Why
People can survive
Under such harsh conditions
("Ka Mary")

Mendes realizes that the situation does not lie in the letting of blood. The answer is Christ.

The Father has elevated him as a word of
 Protest
 Placing him before the world
 To be its hope . . .
 ("The Lord's Ascension")

Arriving at this conclusion was not easy for Mendes. His struggle for understanding in the face of human suffering is evident in his poems, and reminds one of some of Gerard Manley Hopkins' later, darker poems. Again and again, Mendes asks "Why." His growing uncertainty is especially notable in "After a Meeting," "Unpleasant Litany" and "Waves of Silence." But a faith questioned is a faith strengthened. Doubt leads to affirmation.

It is Saturday
 And Sunday is coming
 To empty all graves
 ("The Crucified People")

The Calvary and Crucifixion must take place before a Resurrection. Thus, even when he doubts, Mendes never renounces his faith. Despair leads to a firmer commitment which he urges all to share. Where two or more are gathered, a shared ideal becomes reality.

People gathered in the streets
 Are sacraments of hope.
 ("The Risen People")

The very title of Mendes' collection reiterates this message of hope. Time and time again, the image of flowers emerges in the poems. Purple flowers, delicate flowers, rare flowers, propitiatory flowers, trapped flowers, flowers in the mud. And yes, flowers on fire. The first poem of the collection captures most aptly the floral imagery. "Flowers' Eyes" is a short poem with each line consisting of no more than two words. It reads like a nursery rhyme, its lyrics repeating a chain of words—"flowers," "world," "garden" and "eyes." But this simplicity is deceptive. The grammatical device one tends to ignore—the apostrophe—changes its position and in doing so, changes the focus of the poem making the nursery rhyme a powerful piece. The flower becomes multidimensional holding in its petals the eyes of children and the worlds within the world. The poem ends with a three-worded stanza: "Flower Children's Eyes." And it becomes clear to the reader just how possible it is to set a flower on fire.

Indeed, Mendes' poems blaze, and they shine most when he is at his subtlest. He is most successful when he alludes to the deepest emotions and most complex of issues through his descriptive imagery. Tendrils of wisdom rise effortlessly from the pipe of Bishop Escaler. A barefoot child explores the narrow streets of the city. And in one of the most lyrical poems of the collection, a man and woman pledge love as they ply the seas in a frail vessel.

But when Mendes is most virulent, his venom loses its sting. His tirades, especially in the poems attacking the "tyrant" Marcos, only serve to be strident, and not incisive. The poem "Hail Dead" for instance, hones in on its target, but the anger spews forth in all directions, missing its mark. One can only wish Mendes had maintained his musicality throughout.

The brief blurb on Mendes reveals that he is a Brazilian. In his poems, however, he identifies himself with Filipinos, addressing them as "our people." Only once does he let his thoughts go back home. In the poem "Solitary Prayer at Camp Crame," Mendes wonders, in the midst of People Power euphoria in EDSA, why his continent continues to suffer, with the possibility of a similar miracle taking place there only a distant dream.

Why does Peter approve of this revolution
And not Latin America's?
(*"Solitary Prayer in Camp Crame"*)

Mendes, we are told, is also a priest. Does this calling, in any manner, take away from his craft?

On the contrary. His firsthand experience as a missionary in Mindanao has certainly enhanced the credibility and impact of his poems. The characters peopling his poems are engraved in his memory just as they cannot be forgotten by those who read of their pain and triumphs. Mendes likewise brings to life the moribund genre of religious poetry while making the experience of Christ a shared, felt reality. In an age where it is easy to slide into despair and disbelief, Mendes chooses to seek the saving light in a manmade darkness. When the times make it acceptable for the heavyfooted to trample the flowers, Mendes harvests hope.

The trapped flower
Never says
Despair.
(*"Like a Child"*)

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LEONARD WOOD AND THE PHILIPPINE CABINET CRISIS OF 1923. Revised edition. By Michael P. Onorato. Marikina: J.C. Palabay, 1988. 86 pages.

The more widely-used college textbooks in Philippine history present the administration of Governor-General Wood (1921-27) as a period of unrelenting conflict between Wood and the Filipino political leadership. Wood is usually portrayed as the intractable pro-consul whose insistence on a rigid interpretation of the provisions of the Jones Law made him an "enemy of Philippine autonomy." This insistence was met by the Philippine Legislature's refusal to