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Bamboo in the Wind, by Uranza

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Book Reviews



Bamboo in the Wind. Azucena Grajo Uranza. Manila: Vera-Reyes, Inc. 1990. 309 pages.

In an article on Literature and History ("Literature: A Flesh Made of Fugitive Suns," *Philippine Studies* [28: 59-73]), Linda Ty Casper says:

Literature is one way history, which too often reduces life to dates and events, can animate life so that man is returned to the center of human existence. It is man, after all, not nations, who feels the hunger caused by economic recessions and market fluctuations, who suffers separations and dislocations from social upheavals, who catches the bullets and bombs of war. It is in man's flesh and bones that the events of history are etched. Individuals die, while their country goes on. It is in literature that generations of images representing man are preserved. It is in literature that we can recover again and again the promise of our resurrection. It is the house of our flesh in which we can refresh, restore and reincarnate ourselves. (p. 64)

That paragraph might well serve as a review of Azucena Uranza's novel on the tempestuous events of the early seventies in the Philippines. The novel gives flesh and blood to those heart-rending events in the history of the Filipino people, and provides a living chronicle for readers interested in the events of those years as represented in the literary symbols and metaphors of the novel.

Uranza's novel does not replace history, of course, but it does paint a canvas on which those historical events find concrete meaning. As Casper says, history paradoxically finds flesh in the images and metaphors of literature. For those who were active participants or sympathetic spectators in those events in the Philippines in the years that led up to the imposition of Martial Law by President Marcos, the novel will bring back old memories and perhaps new perspectives, softened and sifted by the passage of time. ("The characters and scenes are all too familiar," writes Dulce Festin-Baybay in the *Manila Chronicle* of 21 November 1990). For those unfamiliar with the events, the novel will bear witness to the universal human quest for freedom in the face of political domination, a quest which knows no geo-

graphical or temporal barriers. It will "animate life so that man is returned to the center of human existence."

The chapter headings provide the outline and the structure of *Bamboo In The Wind*. Chapter 1 begins with the homecoming of Larry Esteva to the Philippines, fresh from studies in the United States. He is the son of a prominent and wealthy businessman, definitely a scion of the upper class. He witnesses a political demonstration at the airport which is ruthlessly broken up by the military, but his passage through customs is "facilitated" by arrangements made by his father's office. These two events foreshadow the conflict and identify the role Larry is to play in the novel—son of the upper class, yet deeply socially involved, torn between conscience and blood. It will take time for that social involvement to become social concern, but the growth of social consciousness in the repatriate Larry forms the framework and the point of view of the novel. Larry is torn between class and conscience. Later he will be torn between his father and the girl he loves. The novel will end with the reconciliation of father and son ("I'm sorry, Papa," Larry said. 'I wish it were different, But it's not. And the quicker we accept it the better we will all feel.' He kissed his father goodnight, something he hadn't done in a long time" [p. 301]), and the hope of the future in the child that Larry's wife carries in her womb. Three generations—as Nick Joaquin, perhaps would put it—have found their common nature in the face of threat from without. But "it had been one long journey, from one wake to another" (p. 309).

The next three chapters introduce the cast of characters for the drama that is to take place. In "The Happy Hour" the upper class characters are introduced at a Homecoming of the Alumni of St. Francis Xavier University (Ateneo de Manila University?) which echoes the homecoming of Larry Esteva in Chapter 1. Larry Esteva returns to the Philippines; the alumni return to their alma mater. The alumni of St. Francis Xavier belong to both sides of the conflict that is to be played out in the pages of the novel. Among them are both villains and heroes, with a generous sprinkling of the noncommitted and the indifferent. The next two chapters introduce the main protagonists—"The New Revolutionaries" and "The Forces of Government." The first part of the novel ends with Chapter 5, "End of an Idyll," which is also a parallel to the Alumni Homecoming at St. Xavier's in Chapter 2. Chapter 5 recounts the return to the province of Larry and Connie—destined to be hero and heroine of the novel—and the announcement of their engagement and their forthcoming marriage in the midst of the patronal splendor of the family hacienda in Kawilihan. The shadow of the serpent, however, is visible in this chapter when the President of the nation ("He's too small for her." p. 139) and his wife ("She's wearing too many diamonds." p. 138) come to greet the young engaged couple, son of a prominent business supporter and daughter of a loyal party Senator, and leave them a gift of silverware. The temptation in Eden is all too evident as well

as the betrayal by Judas. In these first five chapters Uranza has masterfully set the stage for the climax of the novel which is to follow in the second part. Her plotting is classical—almost Shakespearean. Her tragic sense of foreboding and impending doom is almost Greek.

Part 2 of the novel begins with a set of three chapters (“Confrontation,” “Tiempo-Muerte,” and “Death By Fire”) which brings the novel to the climax of those stormy days of Martial Law in the Philippines. Chapter 6 carries the protagonists to the tragedy of Mendiola Bridge. “As Ramon stood horrified, watching the rush of people pouring over the bridge, bursts of gunfire erupted suddenly from different directions.” (p. 180) Chapter 7 brings the strands of the novel together into a common theme of tragedy and death, which is continued in the symbolic and literal destruction of “Death By Fire” in Chapter 9. “In the long hours as he stood by his sister’s bedside he (Ramon) had come to the realization that in a brutal war there were no rules, only victims and victors in a life and death struggle” (p. 200).

The novel comes to an end on a somber note in Chapter Nine (“Into Night”) and Chapter Ten (“The Human Cause”). “They have arrested Senator Valdellon (Aquino?), and a lot of the political opposition, and the publishers and media men, and hundreds of students. They haven’t spared even the priests . . .” (p. 272). But the final pages of the novel hold out a note of hope: “It was going to be a long night, he (Larry) thought, as he placed an arm protectively around his (pregnant) wife. And he wondered whether his father knew that they wouldn’t be getting back to the house till dawn” (p. 309). “All those months she (Connie) had but one thought: that her child must live. For he was the new generation that would rebuild, bind up wounds, and wash away old sorrows” (ibid.). As the novel ends, the cycle is complete. Larry has come home to a nation in crisis. In that crisis he has created a new home with Connie and the child to be born—symbol, perhaps, of the new Philippines to be born, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of Kawilihan and Sapang Bato. There is at least the glimmer of hope that they will “recover once again the promise of their resurrection.”

The prefatory page to the novel says: “Ang Pilipino raw ay parang kawayan. Sa bagyo’y yumuyuko, ngunit di nabubuwal.” (The Filipino, they say, is like the bamboo. It bends in the storm but it doesn’t break.) “I guess we’re like the bamboo,” Larry says. “We don’t fight the wind. We bend with it—but . . . we never break.” National Artist Franz Arcellana, in his citation of the novel as the Palanca Award Winner for 1990, says: “*The Bamboo in the Wind* has ever been the classic metaphor for the Filipino. It is still the truest and the best. In this novel it is illustrated in the great tradition, in a classic manner.”

In 1990, Uranza was asked why she chose this particular story line for her novel. “Just before martial law was declared by the late President Marcos in 1972, everyone was finding a way to save the country,” she answered. “Many were trying to find their own commitment. But wanting and com-

mitting oneself to helping the country is not a monopoly of only one class. The novel shows a stratification of society, how members of particular classes have committed themselves to work for better government, for peace, for justice."

Uranza (M.A. in Literature from the University of the Far East, teacher at Far Eastern University and the University of the Philippines) is presently working on a second novel entitled "The Lotus Eaters." She says it is not exactly a sequel to *Bamboo In The Wind*. It is set in the year 1987 and here, she says, "I try to search for answers to the questions: Did we realize that what we were really hungering for in 1972 was peace, human rights, justice and better government? Did we really change?" Readers and critics will look forward anxiously to the publication of Uranza's second novel, for with her first—*Bamboo In the Wind*—she has established herself at the forefront of Filipino writers in English. In *Bamboo In the Wind*, Arcellana says, she has "created a virtual world, thoroughly believable, fulfilling, solidly satisfying." (*Manila Chronicle*, 21 November 1990). Uranza has succeeded where Casper says all historical novelists must succeed—in "man's flesh and bones where the events of history are etched." Uranza's creation of that historical-literary world with such competence, compassion and style gives promise of good things to come.

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Pusong Walang Pag-ibig. By Roman Reyes. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990. xxvi, 197 pages.

For a large number of Tagalog novelists, the events in the last decade of Spanish rule were appropriate materials for their art. It was as if by returning to the recent past which they had actually experienced, they could relive those momentous occasions not only in their lives but in the life of a whole society. Roman Reyes' *Pusong Walang Pag-ibig* is one such work that drew on actual historical events between the 1890s and the 1900s for the context of a literary work.

The novel starts rather slowly and deliberately as it tries to establish the individuating characteristics of its protagonist Enrique, a nineteen-year-old man endowed with handsome looks and a glib tongue, who is able to speak Spanish, and is a real charmer as far as a great number of ladies are concerned. Without any visible means of support, he sponges off an old couple who have decided to adopt him.

Faced with a lawsuit and in mortal fear for his life because of his indiscretions, Enrique accepts the offer of Tandang Tikong for him to marry