

philippine studies

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

Writing A Great Novel

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Philippine Studies vol. 17, no. 2 (1969): 332–336

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Review Article

*Writing A Great Novel**

Some novels fail because the material is not apt: it is uninteresting or undramatic or amorphous or undigested. It is no more possible to create drama out of undramatic material, than to revive the dead by artificial respiration.

This is of course where the great writer differs from the mediocre: for the great writer can see dramatic possibilities in material otherwise commonplace. The great writer is in fact an image of the great Creator Himself, Who infuses life into inert clay, not by artificial respiration but by a creative breath.

Other novels fail because of some lack in the author. If the cause of the failure is a basic lack of talent or a basic lack of vision, there is not much that can be done about it. *Quod natura non dat, Salmantica non praestat*: neither Salamanca nor any other university — nor even a writers' workshop — can supply the talent which Nature has failed to provide.

Fortunately, this is not the case with Mrs. Quirino. Her first novel is not a success; but it is not for lack of basic talent or for lack of vision, or for lack of patience. (Anyone who can produce a novel of 677 printed pages lacks neither patience nor perseverance.) What Mrs. Quirino lacks — and badly needs — is technique. And since technique can be learned,

* LIKE THE WIND I GO. A Novel. By Liesel Commans Quirino. Quezon City, R. P. Garcia Publishing Co., 1968, iv, 677 pp.

there is every reason to hope that eventually she will produce a good novel, perhaps a great one.

I

The basic defect in this novel's technique is that there is too little direct action and altogether too much narration. Things do not happen before our eyes; we are merely told that they happened. We learn of them at second-hand. When this narration goes on for pages in dreary detail, the reading of a novel can be a painful chore.

This does not mean that everything should be directly dramatized, and that the novelist must never resort to second-hand narration. Even second-hand narration can be rendered dramatic. Agatha Christie's detective novels are full of such exciting second-hand narrations. Josephine Tey has done this brilliantly in a detective story called *The Daughter of Time*, where all the events have happened centuries ago and are brought out bit by bit by second-hand narration. Among Filipino writers, Kerima Polotan handles this technique extremely well in her novel entitled *The Hand of the Enemy*.

But for the most part, it is better to avoid second-hand narrative altogether, and to dramatize the incidents directly, either by dialogue or by letting them happen before the reader's eyes. Mrs. Quirino's novel contains some few passages of this kind, and they are dramatically effective.

Take for example this bit of dialogue in Chapter III. An American GI in post-liberation Manila tells his Filipino girlfriend (who thinks he is going to marry her) that he must now leave her because his army unit is departing and he cannot take her back with him to America:

"Rica, I have been anxious to tell you something for sometime now but I have been postponing it. Now I find that I can't do it any longer."

"What is it, Eric?"

"Well, Rica, the end has come for us," he said flatly.

"The end?"

"Yes — I —" he replied.

"You mean it is all over for us?"

"Yes."

"Why, Eric?"

"Well, for one thing, my unit has received orders to move. But that isn't it," he paused, struggling with himself. "You see, a marriage between you and me would never succeed."

"But why not?"

"My future life is going to be in that little town of Sunny Brook back in Georgia, and — and — you would never fit in, Rica."

"Fit in? What do you mean?"

"Well, you're an Oriental. They would never take you in. They'd make life miserable for us..."

That situation is dramatic: but it would lose all its force if instead of being presented by direct dialogue, it had been merely narrated at second-hand.

That situation, incidentally, is something that could have been turned into one of the great moments in the novel, instead of being inserted merely as a minor incident. It was an experience common enough in post-liberation days. An American GI, battle-weary from New Guinea or from one of the Pacific islands, comes to Manila and sees a different type of woman from "the natives" that he has seen in previous campaigns. Manila is a devastated city, dirty and unattractive: but he meets a girl who is educated, intelligent, understanding, and whose tastes are similar to his own. She can, moreover, speak English fluently and there is no need to resort to pidgin-English. He falls in love (or thinks he does) and pays court to her. She in turn falls in love with him. She is in earnest; but he is not. She plans for their future marriage; but he is wondering how she would "fit in" back home in Georgia. If he is a gentleman (and there were gentlemen among the GI's), he would either marry her or break off relations at once, explaining why he could not marry her. If he is not a gentleman — or he is simply weak or selfish — he would continue to enjoy her company as long as he is in Manila. Then when his "outfit" is moved elsewhere, he simply tells her that he has enjoyed meeting her and that the end has come.

The Tagalogs coined a phrase for such a situation. They call it *hanggang pier*: a love-affair that terminates at the pier or at the airport. The GI sails or flies away. But what of the heart-broken woman who is left behind with her shattered illusions? *There* is material for a story.

II

A second defect in Mrs. Quirino's technique is the uncertainty of the point of view. Ostensibly, the entire novel is narrated by Rica, the heroine's best friend from childhood. But the reader is told many things which Rica could never have known. (One example: how could she know what the visitor is doing or saying in the parlor downstairs, while she herself is upstairs in her bedroom awaiting word that the visitor has arrived?)

Actually, for the purposes of this particular novel, it might have been better to omit altogether the device of a narrator. Far simpler to tell the story directly, from the perspective of what the craftsmen call the "omniscient author".

There are other defects of technique. There is, for example, the excessive length. And, of course, a happier title might have been chosen. Omar Khayam's line, which has a brittle realism in its original context, sounds lachrymose when taken by itself.

III

So much for technique. As for the material, there is one false note. A German businessman falls in love with a Filipina *mestiza*, the daughter of a Spanish father and a Filipina mother. Previous to their marriage, both the German and his future bride are accepted in Manila society. After their marriage, they are both ostracized. The reason (the novel implies) is that Westerners lose caste when they marry a *mestiza*.

To this reviewer, that seems an unrealistic situation. It may be true in other parts of Southeast Asia, but hardly in the Philippines. An Englishman in India or Malaysia might

lose caste among his fellow Englishmen if he were to marry a Eurasian; but no European or American would lose caste in Manila for marrying a mestiza.

Biologically, "mestizos" and "Eurasians" are identical: both are born of mixed parentage, part Oriental, part European. But in social status there is a vast difference between the mestizos in the Philippines and the Eurasians in certain South-east Asian countries. To attribute to a Filipina mestiza the heartaches and frustrations of a Eurasian (or of an American-Indian half-caste) is as unrealistic as to attribute the thoughts of a Russian peasant to an American farmer in Iowa.

Apart from the false note (and perhaps one or two others) the situations depicted in Mrs. Quirino's novel are plausible enough and some are potentially dramatic. It might be worth the novelist's while, instead of writing another novel immediately, to rework some of this material into separate short stories. Novelists are like painters or muralists: before undertaking a large canvas, it might be well to make preliminary sketches or "studies".

The advantage of a short story is that it affords an opportunity to exploit the dramatic possibilities of one particular situation. There are many situations of this kind in the novel; the woman who marries a divorced man and who consequently finds herself cut off from Philippine society; the married woman who falls in love with another man; the deserted woman who assuages her grief by building a palace in Forbes Park; the husband who discovers his wife's infidelity; the Muslim politician who aspires to become President of a predominantly Christian country. All that and much more is in this novel. It is a mine of potentially powerful situations. But the ore has to be taken out of the ground. The precious metal must be separated from the dross.

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