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Things Loved; Things Remembered: Joaquin's "Portrait" and Williams' "Menagerie"

EDGARDO DELA CRUZ

TEN years ago—exactly ten years after the *The Glass Menagerie* of Tennessee Williams had opened on Broadway—Nick Joaquin's *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* was presented by the Barangay Theatre Guild in the Old Victoria Gardens in the Walled City of Intramuros. The director, Lamberto Avellana, had used a realistic interior set placed against one of the crumbling walls of this city and had the narrator, Bitoy Camacho, deliver atop this wall the opening peacen to Intramuros and the memory of a lost world. There was an aptness about it all: the play spoke of an old house in Intramuros and how it had finally been annihilated by the conflagration of a world war. The play was being staged precisely where its action was supposed to have happened. The sight of broken walls, tumbled arches, of buildings and yards overgrown with weeds must have increased the sense of loss and keen awareness of a past glory that had perished except in the memory of some who, like Bitoy, had succumbed to the madness of a new era while still retaining a desperate longing for things past.

The production played for forty-five nights, was produced the following year by the same group at the Ateneo University

auditorium, and went on to a total of one hundred and sixty performances up to 1965, including three special performances in New York put on by the Philippine Theatre Guild of New York at the Barbizon-Plaza Theatre in the early part of 1965. During the summer of the same year, Avellana started filming the movie version of the play.

Literary critics in the Philippines have been unanimous in their praise of the play. Leonard Caspar, in his work *The Wounded Diamond*, calls it "unforgettable"; and Gloria Castro, in an article in *Philippine Studies* dated September, 1956, says, "It is perhaps safe to assume that no other contemporary Filipino dramatist has yet produced a piece that has the depth and eloquence of Mr. Joaquin's *Portrait*."

Attention has been called, of course, to Joaquin's nostalgia for a past which the present can never measure up to. Jimena Austria-Manalo, writing of Manila in the book *Philippine Contemporary Literature*, considers Joaquin one of the reverent exponents of the *caruaje* age "who carry on in the strict tradition, speaking its idiom and wearing its air of injured dignity...[His] stories of [a] dying culture form a separate chronicle of Old Manila." All these sound so much like Nancy Tischler's statement in her biography of Tennessee Williams: "Awareness of the past is always an element in Williams' plays. His characters live beyond the fleeting moment of the drama—back into a glowing past and shrinking from a terrifying future. For both Amanda and the later Blanche of *Streetcar*, the South forms an image of youth, love, purity, all the ideals that have crumbled along with the mansions and the family fortunes."

It is not surprising, therefore, to find Filipino writers like Wilfredo Nollado and Jean Edades commenting on existing parallels between Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Joaquin's *Portrait*. At first glance, these two plays not only seem to reflect the same intense preoccupation with a once lovely past, but also display a similarity in structure. Both plays contain four principal characters (*Portrait* has several other minor characters), a non-existent father, and a portrait that dominates

the action and lives of the characters. They are memory-plays structured in scenes, the whole action supposedly occurring in the minds of their character-narrators.

However, while attention has been drawn to Joaquin's use of the past, not only in his play but also in his poems and short stories (an element of his writing Filipino critics have evidently fallen in love with), little has been said about the nature of his sense of the past as it is specially revealed in *Portrait*. Nollado, in a *Free Press* article ("A Portrait of the Noble and Ever Loyal"), called Joaquin's sense of the past in *Portrait* "historical" as opposed to Williams', which he termed "personal." Such terms, however, could be misleading since they imply that one is broader in scope than the other and therefore possibly more significant. A closer study and comparison of the two plays (*Portrait* and *The Glass Menagerie*) might crystallize not only the quality of Joaquin's sense of the past, but also provide a basis for evaluating his vision.

It would be proper here to start with the more familiar play—*The Glass Menagerie*.

The time is now. Tom Wingfield, in sparsely poetic prose, comments on a by-gone era, on the quality of the play, and the characters involved. He mentions the omnipresent photograph of a father who, with his ever-gallant smile, provides an ironic continuity to the action—ironic because while he seems to represent the fulfillment of dreams made reality (romance for Amanda and escape and adventure for Tom) he is actually no more than a symbol of illusions that negate reality. His eternally fixed smile counterpoints the absurd and pathetic paradox of the characters in the play.

For Tom, the supposed realist, is really a poet and a dreamer. His desire to flee the stifling world of his mother and unreal world of his sister (worlds that the present will not and cannot accept) is a mere rationalization of a similar failure to make a stand in the world.. His work in the shoe factory ends in his getting fired and his eventual flight from his mother's world is not an approach to reality, but a passage through it—like a ghost who finds "in motion what was lost

in space." At the end there is no assurance that he has succeeded in becoming a realist.

Amanda, on the other hand, balances on two worlds—the delusion of memory and the harsh reality of her existence—and she watches with injured desperation both of them crumble before her eyes. According to Tom Donnelly, a New York drama critic who reviewed the play in 1956 she is the sensitive human being who in one moment delights in the simple splendors of nature and in another moment is the trapped creature, compulsively poisoning the lives of her children by the very frenzy of her desire to save them, ridiculous in her pretensions, but dignified in her refusal to surrender to despair. Her paradox arises from her acceptance of facts which never quite escape the mantle of her dreams. She, the dreamer, castigates Tom for being a dreamer. With melodramatic resolve she sets about the task of helping Laura, her daughter, rise from her unreal world of glass animals to the real world of earning a living. And when this effort fails, she arrives at a naive, romantic solution—marriage—a solution both practical and, in the context of her action, strangely archaic because it combines her romantic delusions with her grasp of cold facts. Tom is given the unhappy task of providing the solution by bringing home a gentleman caller.

Jim O'Connor comes, an "emissary from a world of reality." Vibrant, simple and hearty, he draws Laura out of her shell. As Benjamin Nelson, a Williams' biographer, puts it: "Laura comes closer than she ever has been to emerging into a new world; but like the translucent glass touched by light" her radiance turns out to be short-lived. For in the very next moment Jim, the brave, good-hearted bluster, betrays his fear of being left behind by the progress of the good old U.S.A., a fear which leaves him awkwardly confessing that he is engaged to another girl.

He disappears from three people's lives, severing the thread of continuity, provided by the photograph, for suddenly all illusions and, therefore, paradoxes vanish and all that is left is the hard truth. Amanda's silliness vanishes and she gains what Williams calls "dignity and tragic beauty";

Laura's smile is a retreat forever, and Tom finally breaks away to face the world "lit by lightning", but unlike his father, with an added dimension—the ache of memory. This ache could have provided him with the one link with reality. But Tom does not use this to transform his view of the world. Instead, it becomes the almost necessary agony which his poetic soul must be lacerated with in order to arrive at some creative stage.

Jim's passage, therefore, focuses attention, not on the past perfect of ineffectual jonquils and gentleman callers, nor on the simple past of attempted confrontations between illusions and reality, but upon the ever behind-the-shoulder present perfect of an individual's existence where the only antidote to the inescapable reality of human failure is human memory. Thus Tom speaks in the end, not of Amanda's past, nor of Jim's nor of his, but of Laura (the only unambiguous character) in whom are symbolized the inescapable memories of loyalties, loves and tenderness lost. The last lines of the play ("...for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura—and so good-bye...") become an echo of a personal truth: that a man haunted by memories can never grasp the reality of this moment but must find in his past the torture and the balm to confront inevitable failures of the present.

Williams' sense of the past in *The Glass Menagerie*, therefore, is not Amanda's precious Southern era, nor Laura and Jim's encounter, nor the 1930's, but the world of all individuals who have known the tug and pull of once-upon-a-time loyalties. It is a sense that is limited and strongly personal because based on individual memory, but it is nonetheless significant, for that which has haunted one man has become a revelation for others. As Tom says, "It is truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion"—the personal becoming universal.

This quality of a very personal past in *The Glass Menagerie* may be attributed, according to Tischler, to the fact that the characters have their obvious parallels in the members of the Williams' family. While this may be so, the fact remains that the play is not so much a comment on the past

as it is an expression of the present. It operates on two levels—the farther and the nearer past. The former motivates the characters and the latter constitutes the action of the play. Both levels, however, do not constitute Williams' sense of the past—they lead to it. This sense must be found in the present-ness of Tom's last speech where all pasts find their fruition.

Is this true also of Joaquin's *Portrait*?

Bitoy Camacho, the character narrator, opens the play with an eloquent description of Hispanic Intramuros. Then, with evident fondness, he describes the old Marasigan house, symbol of a vanished world where all was good and precious. He laments the passing away of this world. So he goes back to that moment when the era of gracious living was on the brink of being destroyed by a world war and by a new frantic society composed of cheap artists, a materialistic middle-class and an intelligentsia flaunting the latest catch-words of the era.

But unlike Tom, Bitoy's return to the past is not prompted by ghosts of memory haunting the heart, but by the mind's fondness for abstract values. Therefore, he walks through the play not as a participant but as an observer. He spans the gap between the cynical new world and the bewildered old.

Joaquin has tried to add dimension to Bitoy's character by showing him move from a period of hatred for the unchanging lives of the Marasigans, through an admiration of it, and finally becoming a staunch defender of it. At the end of the play, Bitoy wanders through his memory of things past, touching them with fondness, even delight, as a child fondles a loved toy. Then suddenly, he over-dramatically vows to preserve the memory of an old world he once loved. The suddenness of shift from fond remembrance to agonized bombast seems uncalled for. One cannot help feeling that his previous uninvolvedness in the main stream of the action is what makes this shift mechanical rather than inevitable. Bitoy gallantly offers the old world life in the persistence of memory—vowing

to remember rather than pleading to forget. At most, Bitoy has assigned himself poet laureate of a dead age.

With the help of Candida and Paula Marasigan, two spinster sisters whose house he has revisited in memory, Bitoy re-enacts the good old times. He also discovers that the house has been compromised by necessity. The new materialistic world, represented by the elder brother, Manolo, and the elder sister, Pepang, has failed to give steady financial support to the family, forcing the two sisters to make ridiculous attempts at earning a living in order to keep themselves and their father together. Tony Javier (an unscrupulous creature from the slums of Tondo) lives in it as a boarder. In the course of the play tawdry vaudeville artists, cynical news reporters, and a bunch of pleasure-loving middle-class people come in to scoff at the world of these sisters and to mock and shudder at a painting done by Don Lorenzo Marasigan—a painting depicting Aeneas bearing on his shoulders Anchises out of the burning city of Troy, but with a twist. Both Aeneas and Anchises have the same face—that of Don Lorenzo.

Candida and Paula suffer through these weeks of invasion just as they had borne other such invasions during the past year. But they gallantly bear up. What finally breaks up their defenses is the decision made by Manolo and Pepang to sell the house, donate the painting to the government in exchange for a pension for Don Lorenzo, and separate the two sisters, one to stay with Manolo, the other with Pepang. Faced with this threat, the two sisters confess why they could not possibly leave their father and the house or give up the painting.

A year ago the two sisters had lived happily with their father, but destitution had turned them against him. One day they had accused him of ruining their lives and their prospects of marriage—and so he made the painting, thrusting before them their passport to a new life. That night he had tried to commit suicide by flinging himself off the balcony. The fall had only crippled him and his continuing presence in the house and that of the painting had become a reminder of the sis-

ters' guilt. Their attachment to the house was a sort of penance for their violation of the rules of a way of life. This confession only hardens the resolve of the elder brother and sister to separate the three. And so Candida decides to sell the painting.

Candida's decision, reflecting what seems to be a rebellion against a world she is part of, is actually similar in nature to her previous attempt to apply for work as rat catcher for the Bureau of Health and Science. She is not really rejecting her world. She is instead trying to find a place for herself and for her way of life in a strange new world which she must meet on some terms if she is to survive. Unfortunately, her past is too much with her and renders her approach to reality ineffectual. She cannot understand the ways of the new world, unlike Amanda, who understands it only too well but keeps tripping over her dreams. Candida's decision, at first glance, may seem realistic, like Amanda's solution of marriage, but it fails because it disintegrates her world rather than uniting it with the new one.

When Paula realizes that Candida has decided to surrender to the new world, she retaliates by throwing herself at the mercy of the rapacious new society. She allows Tony to seduce her. This might sound like a strange move on Paula's part—gentle and shy and pure as she is: but in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Portrait* sex is not a physical union but an ethereal idea.

As it turns out, Paula's act does not violate her. It makes her see only too clearly the rottenness of the new world. This new knowledge (which prompts her to destroy the painting, thus doing away with their link with the new world) and Candida's final choice of "heroism" over "prudence" unite the two sisters. The final scene ends with their old friends coming to watch a religious procession from their balcony. In one melodramatic moment, Don Lorenzo appears in the doorway, proclaiming by his appearance, the invincibility of the old world.

The emotion-laden recall of this image motivates Bitoy's last speech. However, instead of commenting on this invincibility, Bitoy dwells on things—food, procession, house. He

says, "Your city—my city—the city of our fathers—still lives! Something of it is left; something of it survives, and will survive, as long as I live and remember—I who have known and loved and cherished these *things*!" What he promises to preserve and to continue is not quite clear. Is it the things that he fondly remembers? The grand Hispanic way of life? Or the age when artists were understood by their audience? Thus critics desiring to make statements about *Portrait's* meaning come up with diverse interpretations.

Some, like Maria Aurora Malvar who wrote a comment on the play in *Philippine Studies* (1956), take the title as a starting point and draw the conclusion that Joaquin was scorning the artistic barrenness of modern Filipino society. Others, like Gloria Castro, concentrate on the meaning of the portrait and conclude that the playwright was talking about the old generation saving itself from destruction since the younger generation is unable to save it. Or, in a more optimistic vein, Casper interprets the painting as the past being carried into the future on the shoulders of the present. A more comprehensive view, one however that is not explicitly demonstrated by the action, would be that which, according to Casper, finds Joaquin reaching out for "values—human consideration dignified by daily custom and ceremony which have become not past and gone but ever present as a future compelling because desired." Bitoy's speech at the end and Joaquin's choice of a Yeats quotation ("How but in custom and ceremony/ are innocence and beauty born?") to preface his play would seem to support this last interpretation.

But all these disregard a very important element of the play—the main plot of Candida and Paula, whose being trapped in a past they do not exactly relish negates all that is said about custom and ceremony being the source of beauty and innocence. Ignorance, it seems, would be the more proper word. This has led Miss Castro to wonder why, if the play really aims at stating a historico-sociological theme (that the new society cannot understand the old and that the fault lies in the former), some of the characters, scenes and soliloquies which serve to point out this thesis were cut in the productions of the

Barangay Theatre Guild. Did Joaquin, therefore, write not a play, but a mere speech on a beloved past just because he felt that it was his "vocation" to "remember and sing"?

The confusion seems to arise from the very nature of Joaquin's sense of the past which is not overtly stated in the play but is felt throughout. Casper points out that the play is not so much an act of documentation or of looking backward as it is a display of evident love "for what was on his mind—things made so much more than things: Friday tertulias, sailor blouses, seawinds, October typhoons"—remembrance of things designed to make statements about values of a society. If this is truly Joaquin's sense of the past, it is not compelling enough to give birth to a dramatic situation that would blend fondness for past things or occasions, appreciation for a past way of life, and a commentary on the role of the artist in a society. Love is different from ache—one might prompt an essay, the other produces a play.

Thus, where *Menagerie* attempted less and ended up with more, *Portrait* tried to express more and ended up with less. The former strove to reveal a soul and touched all souls; the latter strove to touch a nation and revealed only one person's preferences.