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H. B. Furay

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The Stories of Nick Joaquín

H. B. FURAY

THE RECENT VOLUME of Nick Joaquín, *Prose and Poems*,* contains stories, poems, a play. It is the stories alone I shall be concerned with here. They are more read and more important, and will be given treatment accordingly; and it is not fair, stories done with, simply to wave at the poems and the play in passing, which is all we would have space for.

First off, Mr. Joaquín's writing has power and elements of greatness. This is a careful statement and should be read as such. His writing also has certain defects—both of omission and commission. It is the nature of these defects that puts the tone of reserve in my statement.

Defects in themselves do not necessarily cancel out the greatness of a writer, any more than they do that of a man. The writer may have defects in the sense that there are some things he simply cannot do. In this sense some of the very finest writers are defective, and no one holds it or should hold it against their claim to greatness; no human being, since he is human, is equally competent in all lines. What we do make the judgment of greatness on is what the writer does have, not what he does not have. If, in the abilities he does have (supposing always that they are worthy abilities and not mere trivia), he has surpassed a certain level of excellence, he is commonly called great; and never mind berating him because, a

* *Prose and Poems*. By Nick Joaquín. Graphic House, Manila. 1952. pp. xi-322.

prose writer, he does not have poetic compactness, or, a poet, he does not display the searching explicitness proper to prose.

But suppose that it is precisely in what he does have, that the writer falls short? Suppose that his deficiency is not just a matter of absences, but is a failure to have achieved, thus far, full and perfect possession of his very virtues? In that case you acknowledge the possession but also note the falling short. You make some such statement as my initial one . . . Primer stuff of criticism, all this. But it seems necessary to say it once again carefully out loud, in view of a widespread current tendency to lay wildly about with unconsidered superlatives, both positive and negative.

Mr. Joaquin's writing, then, has power and elements of greatness. The power is in the richness and flexibility of his style, the greatness is in his vision. He falls short in power because his kind of style works most effectively with only certain areas of story material, and he does not seem to have realized yet that fact about his style, or to have accommodated himself to it. He falls short in vision because the vision itself falls short; it is perception, often full and acute perception, of crises of the spirit, but it stops there; yet crises are meant to be resolved. I have something to say about each of these points, and the last shall be first—for logical, not scriptural reasons. Vision first, then; afterwards, style.

Of the eleven stories included in this book, three are legends, fairy-tale material re-worked poetically ("The Legend of the Virgin's Jewel", "The Legend of the Dying Wanton", "The Mass of St. Sylvestre"); three have, by one device or another, one foot in the past, another in the present ("Three Generations", "May Day Eve", "Guardia de Honor"); the other five depict, in various panels, contemporary human beings in crisis and, through that outward report, the spiritual state of these human beings. The first three are parables, at least in effect, probably in intention also. The second three are virtuoso efforts in their

interweaving of past and present; but are at one in being a comparison or contrast of attitudes, therefore in being a reading of the present in terms of the past. The last five are comments, more or less clear, on contemporary civilization. (One, "The Summer Solstice", doesn't fit without groaning into this pigeonhole; but for present purposes, the classification will hold.)

Now what is Mr. Joaquin's vision in these stories? Vision as applied to a serious writer I take here, arbitrarily, to be an amalgam of his Intent and his Content. I'll explain these terms as we go along.

Let me say at once what I find particularly good, in Intent, about these stories. They are not surface treatments of action but intend to penetrate beyond action to men acting, and beyond men and what they do, to Man and what he ought to do. In carrying out this penetration the stories try to bring in, as a factor emotionally and dramatically perceived, the weight of the past on the present, the sense of the past continuing in, or asking to continue in, the present; and the stories thereby succeed in mustering up awareness of the ageless nature of man's problems and struggles. The conclusion laid out for inference throughout is that modern man is spiritually a starveling and hence a groper in darkness.

This is what the stories are trying to convey, what they intend. And this over-all intent is the primary part of an author's vision; for the Intent presupposes that the author has seen a pattern amid the variegation of human and historic events. Secondarily and subordinately, the author's vision embraces also Content as distinguished from Intent. Content in this context means: what particular scenes does the author select as being most apt to express, in and through human action, the pattern he has pre-drawn out of apparent chaos, the primary vision he has seen? You might say the writer's process is, in this matter, the reverse of the reader's: the writer starts from a vision and works out into the expression of it through selected individual scenes and concrete details; the reader

starts from the individual scenes and concrete details and works back to the vision, the pattern, the *meaning* which is at the heart of the material—and of the author.

Mr. Joaquin's Intent is large and admirable; his Content does not yet entirely measure up; therefore his total vision, although it has in it the intentions of greatness, does not yet fully or even adequately realize those intentions. Thus my quarrel is with that secondary part of vision called Content: the persons, scenes, events selected to carry the Intent.

On the plus side I find that he has almost always selected for portrayal moments of minor or major human crisis: an old man resisting desire, a young girl trying to do the same, members of different races trying to reach across and understand and accommodate themselves to each other, various people will-less in the face of evil, and so forth. This selection means that he will have to deal mainly with psychological investigation, that tangled world of human motivation which is admittedly a welter of complexities; a difficult choice. Then, from the start of his investigation, he has the virtue of somehow being able to look upon his own people and their activities with that sense of surprised discovery, of "noticing", which ordinarily only strangeness makes possible and familiarity rubs out; at the same time, he can put depth into this, his perception of sharply limned outward scenes and actions, because, being a Filipino, he reads them rightly. Thus it is possible for him to move with sureness and authenticity from the outer world of gesture to the inner world of motivation; his progress through suggestion is, for the most part, understandable and valid. Therefore his handling of this delicate business of psychological investigation into the wellsprings of human conduct is often more ordered than is usually the case with this kind of fictional character study. Also, throughout, he is inviting the reader to stop and think about life, to stop and weigh a judgment pronounced in passing, by suggestion or explicitly, on character or action. All this covers the Content of eight of the stories (the parables are apart), and it means, in

sum, that he has chosen a very difficult instrument to play and is playing it with considerable expertness.

On the minus side, I find in these eight stories too much Original Sin unrelieved by Grace or humor, and producing an untrue grayness as the predominating color of life; I find very often for story protagonists hysterics instead of men; I find the interweaving of the threads of suggestion to produce an impressionistic picture at times degenerating into utter confusion; I find this same utter confusion sometimes the final and apparently intended message—and it is a merely negative one: "Cry Havoc, and let slip the dogs of war".

First to last there is a great deal of Original Sin in this book; more specifically, concupiscence speaking forth in plain lust. There is a great deal of it in the world, too, of course, and it is possible that this is what the author wishes to state. In the book, however, the presence of sin is a gray miasma whelming all; there is no relieving brightness whether by consciousness of the lustrous, medicinal sway of Grace or of the saving lift of simple human humor. It is otherwise in life, and to this extent the book is untrue to life.

Moreover, there are two notes which should be added about the portrayal of lust, perversion (whether sexual or otherwise) and all such sordidness. The first note is that one notices filth, perhaps even of artistic necessity pictures it vividly, but one does not wallow in it. In one or two of the stories, "The Summer Solstice", for instance, and parts of "The Woman Who Had Two Navels", there is a certain amount of wallowing evident. I do not mean the author portrays evil sympathetically; he does not. I mean simply what I say, that at times he indulges in detailed treatment of it beyond the dictates of artistic necessity and the bounds of good taste.

The second note is that poetic description of filth does not transmute, by some alchemist's magic, the nature of what is being described; it remains filth. This unfortunate disposition (to be eloquent about evil) is the literary

counterpart of a current Hollywood heresy: Hollywood believes, apparently, that a filthy action performed by someone personable enough (a star) becomes—a wave of the director's wand—charming and therefore understandable and therefore all right. Of all people Mr. Joaquin would be the last consciously to play handmaid to Hollywood. Yet when he casts over lust's shoulder the not inconsiderable mantle of his descriptive power, he is—consciously or not—doing just that.

About the characters. The main ones are, for the most part, introverted, self-commiserating, impulse-ridden hysterics. This may be putting it a little strongly but it is my final impression. I would except Currito Lopez (the Dying Wanton) and Andong Ferrero, who appears briefly in "Guardia de Honor"; but I can think of no one else to except. One looks for men; the man, after many failures, imposes—with the help of God's grace—his will; one finds hysterics; the hysteric is imposed upon . . . by his emotions, by the will of others, by almost any drift of desire or sentiment or event. The great protagonists—Oedipus, Macbeth—sometimes did evil, great evil, but they were men about it at least. They did not whimper that they were purely helpless victims of environment or of a spiritless civilization; or, if they were such victims, they at least stood up to their fate. Set Paco Texeira of "The Woman who had Two Navels" against any such, and you'll see the contrast; soft, girlish—these are the adjectives one thinks of. If this very thinness of manhood in his men is Mr. Joaquin's deliberate comment on our times, then it is a sad comment indeed; and, if pressed to universality, it is a simplified statement and a dramatic one, but, I think, not true, not any more true now than at any other time of the world's history. Actually, the need to portray such self-searching weaklings is inherent in the style Mr. Joaquin has chosen, as I shall say hereafter.

The last two notes "on the minus side" and having to do with Content are really one. The use of impressionistic panels (of scenes or of thoughts) to convey each

story's single effect is highly dramatic and, at best, succeeds in creating panorama, the sense of a vistaed story-picture which makes each story's implied statement at once rise to the level of seeming universal truth. But the manipulation of so many tangled skeins to achieve this, if not perfectly brought off, results not in an effective panoramic impression but simply in utter confusion. It is to Mr. Joaquin's credit, and a mark of mastery of his difficult medium that he sometimes brings it off perfectly; it is a mark of imperfect mastery that he sometimes does not. It may be said, probably has been said, that the message of utter confusion *is*, in those cases, the final message: The Waste Land's incoherence pictures a waste land. Well, at peril of being thought insufficiently egg-headed, I still say: first, this defense (the impression of utter confusion *is* the single effect) is, I strongly suspect, very often a consequent rationalization, an *ex-post-facto* justification; second, Cubism and Dadaism, too, may be messages in themselves, but they are intelligible messages only to other Cubists and Dadaists, which most of us are not. Besides, in the final analysis, such a message is purely negative; but greatness in an artist, literary or otherwise, would seem to call for something more than that, some reaching toward a remedy, an answer. Posing a question is good but is only half of a satisfying whole. Saying that we are collectively a mess and making us realize it, may also be good; but it is incomplete until one strokes in also a few pathways to the stars.

The parables ("The Legend of the Virgin's Jewel", "The Legend of the Dying Wanton", "The Mass of St. Sylvestre") stand by themselves. In them Mr. Joaquin steps off from today and from reality, and writes of far-off things. The pageantry of his style can be untrammelled here. In these stories, too, his vision stands mature and grace-full. These stories, although they may perhaps be only finger exercises, are yet the proof that the writer does have mature and grace-full wisdom. Setting these legends against the matter and style of some of the other stories also shows how that wisdom collapses into mere psychia-

try, and that grace dies to mere sentimentality once Mr. Joaquin moves from the ages into the now. Read "The Mass of St. Sylvestre" and notice how the sense of strain, of artificial posturing, comes in at the end as soon as the G. I. friend comes in. Something similar happens whenever Mr. Joaquin moves wholly from the past to the present. It is as if the cloister's clear sight of all things in the light of eternity became foreshortened and twisted from going too deep into the world and staying there too long.

Which brings us down to the second main point of this review: Mr. Joaquin's style and the power that is in it. That Mr. Joaquin has great, tumbling power in his writing is, I think, not arguable, any more than it is arguable whether or not he has expertness in that part of style which has to do with the tactical disposition of scenes and characters, and the handling of continuity from one such scene to the next. He has this expertness; and he has power. The occasional long sentences which heap together, in one breath as it were, running impressions side by side with continuing action, are probably the strongest isolated witnesses to that power. Let me quote one in testimony. It is selected, more or less at random, from "May Day Eve".

But, alas, the heart forgets; the heart is distracted; and Maytime passes; summer ends; the storms break over the rot-ripe orchards and the heart grows old; while the hours, the days, the months, and the years pile up and pile up, till the mind becomes too crowded, too confused: dust gathers in it; cobwebs multiply; the walls darken and fall into ruin and decay; the memory perishes... and there came a time when Don Badoy Montiya walked home through a May Day midnight without remembering, without even caring to remember; being merely concerned in feeling his way across the street with his cane; his eyes having grown quite dim and his legs uncertain—for he was old; he was over sixty; he was a very stooped and shriveled old man with white hair and mustaches, coming home from a secret meeting of conspirators; his mind still resounding with the speeches and his patriot heart still exultant as he picked his way up the steps to the front door and inside into the slumbering darkness of the house; wholly unconscious of the May night, till on his way down the hall, chancing to glance into the sala, he shuddered, he stopped, his

blood ran cold—for he had seen a face in the mirror there—a ghostly candlelit face with the eyes closed and the lips moving, a face that he suddenly felt he had seen there before though it was a full minute before the lost memory came flowing, came tiding back, so overflowing the actual moment and so swiftly washing away the piled hours and days and months and years that he was left suddenly young again; he was a gay young buck again, lately come from Europe; he had been dancing all night; he was very drunk; he stopped in the doorway; he saw a face in the dark; he cried out . . . and the lad standing before the mirror (for it was a lad in a night gown) jumped with fright and almost dropped his candle, but looking around and seeing the old man, laughed out with relief and came running.

This is eloquent, surely. But it is also evidence toward the point I made earlier, about why this welling power has fallen short, thus far, of greatness. For the writing classifies itself at once as that type of style called ornate or, more properly here, lush. It is a style by William Faulkner out of Thomas Wolfe, and it is the style, anyone who has read the stories can testify, which comes naturally to Mr. Joaquin's hand at the peak moments of his effectiveness. He has committed himself to the free exercise of this style, it seems, as that which all the rest builds toward; the subordinate parts of each story lift to the moments, here and there, when the meaning of the varied dramatic pictures he has been setting side by side can be distilled, full voice, in a poetic passage of sheer accumulated pictorial realization. So too throughout, the minor effects which prepare for the major are produced by judiciously selected and vividly etched detail after detail thrust in a controlled stream on the reader's imagination. It makes for intense interest and for sharp realization at the moment when all the loose threads are gathered; and it is a technique which, at best, delivers the most stirring effects possible to that form called the short story. But it has two drawbacks: the first is that the heaping of details throughout necessarily calls for the constant use—in minor key during the building toward climax, in major at the point of climax—of the style which I have named lush; the second

follows from the first and is that a pre-determination on use of the lush style pre-determines and thereby limits the selection of Content. To re-state this more simply:—My technique calls for heaped details; heaped details call for the lush style; the lush style calls for acceptance of certain types of subject matter only. We arrive thus at my initial statement (made long ago and far away) that Mr. Joaquin's writing falls short in power because his kind of style works most effectively with only certain areas of story material.

This limitation of subject matter by the exigencies of style is not a new or remarkable thing. What does deserve remark and, I think, has not been remarked sufficiently, is the extent to which this, as verified of the lush style, automatically brings into existence practically everything which those of us not "literary" find objectionable in the modern literary short story, whether P. I. or Stateside. We object to the over-all grim and emotional preoccupation with Sin, especially sensuous sin, and its frequent gray triumph; we object to the unreality of characters who are uniformly hysterical, introverted and ridden by impulse and tend to end up, whether they do or not, completely dotty and entirely surrounded by rabbits (as Mr. Wodehouse would put it) in one of the attics reserved for Mr. William Faulkner's post-Civil War decadents; we object to such a multiplication of detail (very often sordid detail: strange how the sordid lends itself to vividness—as Hollywood knows) that the story, if any, gets smothered and so do we. In short, we object to the apparent divorce of the story world from normal life; and we tend to conclude, unfairly, that the reason for all this is that the persons writing are not nice or not normal.

The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars or in the persons but in the style. It seems to me that the style lies at the root of all this bizarre and alienating "strangeness" of such stories. The style is pre-chosen to the matter, and the style so pre-chosen is lush, and the lush style must work with the exotic. If the writer takes things far off in time or place for his subject, this need of his style for

the exotic is at once satisfied without any further introduction of the bizarre; thus the at-homeness, without being flamboyant or gray about it, of Mr. Joaquin in legend material. But if the writer takes today for his subject, then his lush style, needing the exotic, must make today exotic—which means, as it has always meant when an analogous literary situation occurs, that the material must come from the half-world of human beings at precarious grips with naked evil, and therefore the human beings must be such as do not conquer evil too easily or often, and so forth. The subject matter of the lush style is, when the time and place is today and here, necessarily the spiritual equivalent of streetwalkers and opium eaters and down-and-outs. Mr. Joaquin's style is lush, therefore it works best with the exotic; and to find the exotic in today he must deal with eccentrics, self-searchers, women with two navels, and the like. Thus, when working with today, he produces, finally, a picture which is only half the whole picture and that the negative half; and so the very power of his style fathers a distortion of Content which makes his total vision imperfect and imperfectly expressed.

We return to the original statement which is the whole burden of this review: Mr. Joaquin's writing has power and elements of greatness; and, for the reasons set down, that is all so far.

