

philippine studies

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

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Philippine Studies vol. 42, no. 2 (1994): 247–254

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

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Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.



Dangerous Grace: A Novel of the Philippines. By Robert W. Whalen and Richard T. Goode, based on an idea by Billy O. Wireman. Quezon City: Rex Book Store, 1992. 234 pages.

The authors of *Dangerous Grace* write that in the heart of Manila, there is a reviewing stand in Luneta Park,

the political and spiritual soul of the Philippines, and the place where all important national political events take place. Luneta is to the Philippines what the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial are to Washington, Red Square to Moscow, and Tiananmen Square to Beijing. (p. xiii)

The reviewing stand has its back toward Manila and its face toward the city.

In front of the reviewing stand are life-size statues of the carabao, the native work animal of the Philippines, and the tamarau, another animal indigenous to the islands. Both are large, horned animals, like oxen or water buffalo. The carabao is submissive. Its horns are turned downward, bowed to the yoke.

This is the inscription below the carabao: "Sturdy of patience, in the sun industrious, bearing with us what burdens bow our breed. Undaunted hail the common as illustrious, even the sweat that gives the soil our seed" (p. xiii). The tamarau is full of energy and anger, and is poised to strike. Its nose is snarled and its head is straining to break loose and be free. This is the message below the tamarau: "O symbol of a people's Dangerous Grace. Power controlled the rage that startled when a great cry rent the slumber of the race. When will that horned fury stir again?" (p. xiv). Behind these statues is a small cross on a long pole that reaches far into the sky above the park. The cross is the highest point in the park and can be seen from anywhere in the area.

The carabao and the tamarau in Luneta Park are the theme of this locally published novel. The authors are Americans, but deep admirers of the Philippines. Billy Wireman has been President of Queens College in Charlotte, North Carolina, since 1978. For ten years previously he was president of Eckard

College in St. Petersburg, Florida. He has extensive consulting, lecture and research experience in Asia, and particularly in the Philippines. He has published over 150 articles on Asian and world affairs. Richard T. Goode is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English at Queens College. He has a doctorate in English Renaissance Literature from the University of Texas. Robert W. Whalen is Professor of History at Queens College and is the author of two books on German History which investigated the moral imagination of the German resisters who attempted to overthrow Adolf Hitler in 1944. With such varied, and yet complementary backgrounds among the authors, the reader sometimes cannot help but speculate on which of the three authors is responsible for each part of the novel, or for each passage of intriguing data or insight. It is easy enough to guess from whom the historical data lying underneath the novel came, or the political intrigues, but who is responsible for the love story of Andres and Ite, or that of Raul and Maria?

In the Authors' Note these Americans write:

This is a work of fiction. Though it reflects, we hope, some of the realities of life in the Philippines, it is entirely fiction. We have freely invented people and events as our story warranted. We are not Filipinos. But over the years, we have come to respect, and indeed admire, the Filipino people. Their history, their struggles, their victories, have sparked our imagination. We hope that Filipinos will look on our errors with indulgence. We hope that non-Filipinos may learn something about the lives and challenges, hopes and dreams, of the Filipino people. We hope our tale can become a part, however small, of the much larger story of the Philippines. (p. vii)

The Prologue

The novel begins with a brief prologue which sets the historical frame for the novel—Philippines present, past, present, linked by the pervasive presence of evil. A decaying corpse is found among the mounds of garbage in Smokey Mountain. Sixteen more bodies are discovered in various parts of the city. The bodies have been terribly tortured and abused, bones broken, the bodies flayed and burned and tortured. Both the military and the leftist rebels are shocked. Neither group, though both are not unfamiliar with political torture and salvaging, can explain the discoveries. But to Raul Martinez, Sr., an aging nationalist senator, the events are a reminder of the murderous treachery that almost decimated the ranks of the anti-Japanese freedom fighters he had led during the Second World War. He had

believed, or more hoped than believed, that this thing was gone, purged, destroyed. He had driven it out of his memory. This cunning. This cruelty. This evil. He knew it. And it knew him. The ancient enemy had returned. (p. xiii)

Part One—The Early Days

Part One of the novel—nine chapters—is perhaps the best part of the book. It is titled: “The Early Days.” To trace the origins of this “ancient evil” that has once again arisen in Smokey Mountain in contemporary Manila, the authors flashback to the early days of the Spanish conquest of the Philippines. Part One is a delightful novelette in its own right. It is the story of Sgt. Andres Urdaneta, the Jesuit Father Martin Herrada, Miguel Lopez de Legaspi, grand commander of the third expedition from New Spain to the Islas de Poniente, and Tupas, the *dato* of Cebu. It is a rather captivating love story of Andres and Itel, the daughter of the Dato of Cebu, which begins when Andres rescues Dantu, the brother of Itel and the son of the Dato, from almost certain death in a carabao (the docile, subservient beast of burden of the Luneta statues) mud wallow. Part One has history, romance and very perceptive stories of the clash and fusion of the Spanish Cross and the Sword, Spanish and Filipino and the native and Moro cultures.

Part One is a very good read. It is well written, and deeply moving, historical fiction at its best, and could well stand on its own as a novel, if only the authors had finished the story of Andres and Itel in more depth. Their romance somehow slides off into obscurity, overwhelmed, perhaps, by the authors’ determination to complete the cycle of the “ancient evil.” But it would have been nice to follow Andres and Itel to their graves and seen their children grow up in the changing times of Manila in the sixteenth century.

But, perhaps all too quickly, Part One comes to an end with a flashforward to the end of the Spanish regime in the Philippines as Carlos Martinez reads an aging parchment from Andres Urdaneta. The parchment had been in the Martinez family for generations.

It was an ancient letter, full of strange names. Itel and Dantu, and Saluddin, and Laon, the god of ancestors, all mixed up with accounting figures and cargoes from the early galleon trade in the islands. Carlos liked to imagine what these people were, these ancient ancestors of his He often took the letter out and read it over. Especially in these days of trouble, this time of revolution when the future of his nation was at stake. There was a spirit in the letter that helped him to know who he was, who they all were, that gave him strength. A Power he needed to understand. To use. (p. 85)

But the historical and generational theme continues as, later towards the last page of Part One, Carlos’s son, Pedro, reads a particularly significant passage from the same letter of Urdaneta, “As one version of the power recedes, another takes its place,” and reflects that:

There was a power loose in the islands again. A power for good. A controlled rage. A power for evil. Deceit and oppression, hunger and

disease, the starvation of people, the land laid waste, mutilated bodies, stomachs split open, heads on a pike. O Dangerous Grace. (p. 90)

Part Two—Ghosts

The novel then leaps forward to the mid 1980s. Part Two, which is titled "Ghosts," is once again a brief flashback (just three chapters) from post-1986 to the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines to trace the reemergence of the "ancient evil" among the anti-Japanese Freedom Fighters during the war. Senator Martinez tries to piece together the puzzle of the flayed bodies in Smokey Mountain and throughout the city of Manila.

"What I'm looking for," Senator Martinez says, "is this. At the end of the war, when I was still a young man . . . an American came here to the Philippines to make a film. A documentary. About the guerilla war against the Japanese. But the film was never made. . . . All those materials were collected together, those bits of film, and letters, and papers, and put in a large box. There was a big debate about what to do with that box. Some wanted it destroyed. Others wanted everything made public. I remember it because I was in politics then, it was one of my very first debates. The solution was a compromise. The box was neither opened to the public nor destroyed. It was sealed and placed in the National Archives, sealed in perpetuity. Isn't that foolish? To keep something and then say 'sealed in perpetuity?'" (p. 93)

Martinez is hopeful that the sealed material and the pieces of the documentary film will give him the clues to the tortured bodies. He bribes the keeper of the archives for access to the material (the archivist is later killed) and he calls back his son, Raul Jr., from his studies abroad to help him solve the puzzle. At this point the novel takes on the characteristics of a spy novel.

Part Three—Now

Part Three is titled "Now" and becomes a rather exciting spy thriller, complete with CIA assassins, leftist agitators, drug dealers, safehouses, and hit men. The hero of the third part of the novel is Emilio Aguinaldo Cleary, a Filipino-American called Eddie who is sent to kill Raul Martinez. He was named after the great national hero and his father who was a Methodist missionary in the Philippines. He tells Raul Martinez:

"I am an American. My father was American, Caucasian. My mother was a Filipina. Hence I look like you. I have your skin, your eyes, your hair, your memories. But I am not like you. I am different. The Philippines is not my place. The Philippines is my place. I do not even understand myself." (p. 213)

The heroine of Part Three has to be Helena, one of the best of spy novel heroines, who rescues Cleary in the end and brings him to safety among the real Filipino people: Helena stood next to him, held his hand, smoothed his hair.

"Am I home?" he asked her very quietly.

"Yes, Eddie, you are home now," Helena said.

Eddie asked her, "They'll hide me here and I'll be safe?"

"Yes."

"And God will find me where they hide me?"

"God will find you, Eddie." (pp. 233-34)

But one could also make a very convincing argument that Raul Martinez is the hero of Part Three. And the heroine is Maria who shares with Raul one of the more touching love stories of the novel.

They got into the habit of going for walks. Once each day, sometimes twice each day. Down the trail out of the village, into the cane fields, sometimes off into the jungle where Maria seemed to know every tree, where Raul felt a little frightened. Often they were very quiet—Maria did not talk very much; she seemed to enjoy silence as much as conversation—but sometimes they talked. . . . He did not know what to make of her. At first he thought of her as a kind of noble savage, innocent, unspoiled, and so on, but he quickly discovered that there was nothing naive, and certainly nothing savage about her. He thought at first that she might be some kind of distilled Filipino essence. But she wasn't that. She eluded every kind of category he tried to place her in. She was neither country girl nor forest nymph, not sign or symbol of anything other than herself. (pp. 179-80)

It is clear that in the minds of the authors, Raul Martinez is the central focus of the third part of the novel and of the theme as well. Eddie Cleary is only the counterfoil to Raul. After his father is assassinated, Raul rises in Luneta to speak to the Filipino people. He was up on the same reviewing stand where his father had been shot:

"My sisters," he began. "My brothers. I want to talk to you from my heart. You know what has happened in these days. You know of the evil which struck me, struck us. You know that I was away many years, but now have come home. This you know. So now I want to talk to you from my heart. Here, in this place, we are one people. And as one people we stand for our one people. We are young and old, men and women, but one. In our veins course many bloods—Malay and Chinese, and Spanish and American. We are very different from each other, and yet we are one. We are Catholics and Protestants, Buddhists and Muslims, and some of us profess no faith, but still we are one. We come from many homes, from all

over our 7,100 islands, but still we are one. The rich are not the Philippines, but neither are the poor. The Malays alone are not the Philippines, but neither are the Chinese or Spanish or Americans. No class, no race, no region alone claims to be the only Philippines. For this one nation is many, and this multitude is one. We are many. We are one. To affirm who we are means to affirm plurality and paradoxes. We are not one in blood, not in speech, not even in our dreams. But we are one in suffering. We are one in the face of the typhoons and earthquakes, which hurl themselves against our island home. We are one against the invaders who have tried to enslave us. We are one in suffering from poverty, from crime, from injustice, from oppression. For make no mistake, even the rich will suffer if poverty is not checked; the just will suffer if crime is not suppressed; the comfortable will suffer if injustice is permitted; and even the oppressor will be dehumanized by his oppression. We have suffered much in this our island home. The soil is soaked with our blood, with our tears. But we shall be one in our resurrection. For we shall be redeemed, if we suffer with nobility, with gentleness and decency. If we suffer with each other's suffering, we shall be redeemed. If we embrace each other's right to be different, to be free, if we bear each other's burdens, share each other's sorrows, if we pledge ourselves to democracy, to freedom, to unshakeable respect for human rights, then we shall be redeemed." (p. 232)

Social Commentary

Rex Legayada Aguado, in his review of *Dangerous Grace* in *The Manila Chronicle* (8 May 1993) wrote that "the book has the intriguing quality of a spy thriller, the instructive element of historical fiction and the wit of social commentary (e.g., 'It was right that the nation's name was plural, for there were many Philippines.')

The social commentary layer of the novel leads to many intriguing passages, that are, Aguado says, almost poetic. For example, Raul's description of the jeepney:

A bastard thing, half jeep, half pick-up, filled with coughing, choking people holding handkerchiefs to their noses. But a magical thing, so gloriously and so courageously painted in reds and whites and greens, so polished and chromed, so decked out in Jesuses who look like Elvis.

In another passage, Raul describes his country to an American classmate: "My country is a border town, a Juarez of the mind, Asia and America, both and neither, bruised and broken, and extravagantly hopeful."

When he first meets his father in Manila, Raul asks him:

"Father, what has happened to our beautiful country? It should be paradise. When I was young, we, and Singapore, and South Korea and

Taiwan, we were all brothers and sisters. Now they're all grown up. Now they're all strong. And we seem to be going nowhere. Or even worse, backwards. Every day poorer, duller, more trivial, more violent. Our people are clean but our capital is submerged in filth. Our people work and work and work, and yet we're poor. We are peaceful, we are a family people, we are deeply religious, but every year there is more killing. Father, there is something bad here. It is almost as though something cruel and bad has selected our beautiful country as its lair. I read once that the opposite of the human is not the bestial. It is the demonic. It is not that we are becoming animals—would that we were. It's that . . . I don't know. I think 'cancer' or 'poison' . . . I don't know. Father, what is happening to our beautiful country?" (p. 129)

It is this sort of writing that carries the theme of the novel—the “ancient evil” that continues and returns, never to be evaded. It was there in the time of Andres and Itel, it was there in the time of Carlos Martinez, it was there in the post-1986 era. It is here in the Philippines once again today.

Conclusion

The novel is essentially historic. But the “historical flow,” as Aguado comments, “is sometimes erratic.” It is perhaps even worse than that—it is confusing. The flashbacks, and flashforwards, and the flashbacks within the flashforwards, do make for confusing reading. Aguado says:

The sequence of time does not simply meander or spiral; it vanishes and then jumps out of nowhere. The main character himself, Senator Martinez, says that time is not a continuum, but a layered structure of events where the past coexists with the present, and the future is entangled with the present. Unfortunately the book's thread of history which, if finely woven, could have provided a unifying feel, gets tangled and twisted, and even snipped in some key places.

A straight historical chronology within the frame of the Prologue might well have made for simpler reading. But the theme of historical cycles in the style of Joaquin's “generations,” does add much to the novel. (*Dangerous Grace* reminds the Philippine reader of Joaquin's *Cave and Shadows* in many aspects.)

On the theme of history, one of the truly moving sections of Part One is Itel's solemn speech to Andres about the beginnings of Philippine history which is the real theme of the novel, about her native culture, and about herself, and why Andres will never really be able to understand her:

“My father, Tupas, has great power. In this world, for this time. He rules the barangay, tells the people where to plant, what food they can have. He

is now. Laon (the god of ancestors) is then. He is all our pasts . . . our ancestors, those who have come before. But he is not just then, they are not just then. He is now, too. We are all connected with each other, as on a string stretched out on the ground. Then and now and what will be. If you pick up the string and let it fall into your hand, all parts touch each other. Then, long ago and soon to be touch each other. The past is everywhere in your hand, all along the string. That is the way our ancestors are in us now and we will be in our children. And Laon is the string." (p. 35)

The novel would be less of a novel than it is without the historical frame. But the stitches between the sections—perhaps the result of three authors trying to stitch together a coherent novel—do need reworking.

Dangerous Grace will remind the scholarly or literary reader of Yeats's "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere, the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Surely some revelation is at hand. Surely the Second Coming is at hand. . . . What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

The literary student will also have a lot of fun tracking down the multiple layers of symbolism in "the ancient evil" of the novel. Theological critics will, no doubt, make a good case for Original Sin and man's innate tendency to evil as the "ancient evil" that returns generation after generation to haunt, not only Filipinos, but all human beings as well. The theological critics are sure to spend a lot of time on the authors' interpretation of "dangerous grace." Psychological critics will find much support for the interpretation of the "ancient evil" in Freudian and other theories of psychological evil and psychocultural influences on the human person.

Wireman, Goode and Whalen have managed to write an impressive novel of the Philippines. It is a historical novel, spy thriller, romantic story and social commentary all in one. Perhaps its greatest value is that it does reecho, through the eyes of these three foreign authors, what has been said so many times by contemporary Filipinos:

There is a power loose in the islands once again. A power for good. A controlled rage. A power for evil. Deceit and oppression, hunger and disease, the starvation of people, the land laid waste, mutilated bodies, stomachs split open, heads on a pike. O *Dangerous Grace!* (p. 90)

Filipinos will have to look once again to the Luneta—the political and spiritual soul of the Philippines—to the carabao and the tamarau. But perhaps, most importantly, contemporary Filipinos will have to look to the cross on the pole that reaches into the sky above Luneta Park.