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## A Reach of Conscience

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## Review Article

### A Reach of Conscience

EDITH L. TIEMPO

QUESTIONS. By F. Sionil Jose. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1989, second ed. 59 pages.

As a first book of poems, *Questions*, by the novelist F. Sionil Jose, poses not only questions but also answers that stir up displaced memories, confrontations, recognitions, and a deeply personal urge toward an inquiry into the self—and beyond that, into the self's turbulent relation to the social milieu.

The quietly explosive insights dramatized in the poems revolve around certain themes that are basic, and these are explored in short, disarming, straightforward lines that frequently belie the complexity of experience embodied in the almost laconic utterances. Recurrent are the themes of loss, the drive toward self-conquest, a wry awareness of mortality and its exigencies. Trapped in the toils of inherent idealism, the self hurts, endures, and hoards its little victories in the leavening confines of a hard-won humility. These themes, fundamental and imperative, burgeon as insights that are intimately the individual's responses to his environment and to his own eidetic nature; but the poems manage to go beyond these individual responses and reverberate in the collective predicament of society as well. Thus, the viewpoint is vigorously personal, but also inescapably circumscribed by the larger environment of the world. In exposing the necessity to maintain one's poise in this double-context, the poems portray the crucial quandary in very understated terms, as in the cry of the man craving after equipoise and freedom in "Balance," (p. 23), which ends with these lines:

Who has the eyes, the mind?  
This great white circle  
Strangles me.

In this poem the private agony, realized in the singular, bursts out into a cry unanswerable and cosmic: no florid rhetoric or anguished stance could

encompass the intrinsic human paradox laid open in these lines, as they pack both the physical and the metaphysical essences of the quandary in a single moment of expression.

The quality of "double-awareness" may also be seen in "February 25, 1986." The material here could so easily lend to excess, either in paean-mongering or in bathos, but the poem tersely develops its sensibility, from the "I" in the first line to the "We" (capitalized) in the last line, a pluralizing of vision wholly in consonance with the composite vantage point chosen by the persona in these poems.

Insights and articulation shape each other, often in very subtle manner. For instance, the poem cited above is not the celebration of a people's conquest over wrong, but rather it exalts something more pointedly specific; it proclaims a rare and momentous victory: the conquest of "self," the people's breaking free of the "cocoon," the emergence from the chrysalis and all the classic traits of the pupa—the comfortable refuge provided by immaturity, dependence, bondage and the pusillanimous posture, especially in the matter of development, where inadequacy hurts to the quick. The poem is saying that February 25, 1986 marks the assertion of an authentic *national personality* broken out of the entrapping "cocoon"; thus, the identified personality, "We," repeated litany-fashion in the last stanza. The poem is the triumph of one word poetically conceived—"cocoon," reinforced and supported by the connotations generated in the use of "alleys," "warrens," and the "perfumed enclaves" redolent of sensuous frivolity and indulgence.

Naturally, the tone of these pieces, too, is complex, even deceptive; the gentle introspection dredges up a phalanx of memories and possibilities, remoteness smites upon what is imminent, and a fugitive irony twists in and out toward the stark revelations so tangentially, and guilelessly, exposed. The poetic manner pays external obeisance to the demands of contemporary free verse, but actually owes much of its impact to the "elliptical" procedures of ancient Chinese poetry (which Japanese poetry adapted); for whether the particular poem explores the more arid beds of experience, or wobbles upon the peaks, or probes around in the grey areas of the subterranean, the poetic approach is predominantly oblique. The pen slips only in the lines where the frontal approach is attempted and the trap of denotation nips the utterance in the bud. For a demonstration, we juxtapose the two poetic strategies, as seen in the final stanzas taken from "You are flagging now, Tidaya" (p. 51) and "Surveyor" (p. 33), respectively. Both poems deal with the same theme, the ravages wrought upon the human creature: in the first poem, by old age, and by man's own erring tendencies, in the second poem. From "Tidaya":

So sleep well, Tidaya, sleep well if you can  
 The long sleep of those who tried.  
 There will be younger ones, sterner ones  
 Who will come and push you aside.  
 This is the way an outsider dies  
 Denied all his human ties.

These lines seek to enlist the reader's sympathy for the dying person utterly incapacitated after a life of fruitless trying. But the poem's direct-statement strategy limits the utterance only to what is actually said; the denotative language spells it all out, and the tyranny of this approach does not allow the reader to catch any reverberations and incremental nuances, for there are none imbedded in the articulation. Thus, what is finally garnered is a cut-and-dried sentiment.

Contrast this procedure with that employed in the final lines of "Surveyor":

So much rain has fallen  
But the water chestnut  
Does not thrive on clay.  
Stone angels cannot flap their wings,  
The cemetery is a quiet place.

The decay in the human condition is rendered here by the resonating images in the lines: the water chestnut, otherwise hardy, is deprived of its natural habitat; "clay" echoes man's all-too-mortal beginnings; "stone" reinforces "clay" (no pun intended); and "stone" qualifying "angels" implies man's pitiful attempts at mimicking the immortal. Finally, the "cemetery" rams home the irrevocable truth that only in death can men know the true peace, or hope to be divine. The whole stanza *resonates*.

The poems that reveal their central meaning through statement and rhetoric are disadvantaged, not for want of a central concept to share, but because of the stultified development of that concept. Such is the poem, "Belief," p. 47, which is pure statement, and so is "Batasang Pambansa," p. 50. "Roadsign VI," p. 7, is more allegory than symbolic expression; the tool that shaped "The Old Woman at Padre Faura" is not poetics but rhetoric.

Contrast these poems with those using a more adroit indirection, or even with the poems that show a teetery blend of statement and working image, and the difference is striking. For instance, the Lilliputian poem, "Election, 1980," p. 50, is hard, sure well-cut; likewise, "Transition I," p. 31, where the images are not necessarily *en vibrato*, offers an ambivalence suggestive of pungent possibilities.

Need more be proved on the matter of poetic "strategy"? Sionil José is a thumping wizard at what we may call the elliptical maneuver, and likewise his authority over the oblique manner, wherever properly exerted, reaps a harvest of lean, spare lines bristling with images, situations, implications that resound in and beyond the verbal paucity of their contexts: "I was blessed, perhaps, with salt," p. 35; "the cratered spirit" (why "cratered" and not, say, "gouged"?), p. 32; "like the mummies of Sagada—flesh made past," p. 54; "May I be a coward twice?" p. 21; "this deed of life," p. 23; "Did I sleep and not know it?" p. 2, among a number of others, pithy and provocative. These phrases are taken out of context and of course cannot vibrate separate from their frameworks—which one must scrutinize with a wary eye—like the different places where the word "white" is used, as in

pages 36 and 37; and on page 23, where "white" is quite possibly related to the "jungle of metaphors" and "dreamed another man's dream," and "his adjectives in my brain," words stressing the caustic *mea culpa* of "Holy Writ," p. 24.

Yet another subtle device with words may be mentioned, and it is the abrupt inversion of meanings, a procedure that creates inverted truths only implied or furtively disclosed: "dust made permanent," p. 44; "whose backs are bent with self-esteem," p. 32; "manufacture truths/like nuts and bolts," p. 46; "Long live the new pygmy masters," p. 49; "history died/Only the crickets understand," p. 41.

A poem may develop a "whopping-good" concept by using acknowledged poetic devices and yet may lack the *tone* which sharpens its meaning and which is manifestly the author's alone, a voice labelling his work unmistakably like a signature. *Questions*, this little book, generates the composite tone integrated from the sense of loss, the cynical outbursts of anger, pain, and fear, the thrust of the spirit in its rare barks of triumph. It is the voice of one confronted with mortality and who is coming to terms with it in small moments of grace, with nonchalance and with humor that has not lost its acrid beginnings. A complex tone, but should one expect anything less?

The lines below ("Questions IV," p. 21) pose the ultimate question in this collection, a query that asserts its own inevitably ambivalent answer:

Some leave decayed by grief  
Others gnawed by fright. I will be fearful  
But on my feet.

What then should I bring?  
This deed of life, of having breathed  
The foul air yet truly lived.

So God, if You are there,  
May I be a coward twice?

The questions and answers here are projected by a voice at once assertive and tentative, the bravado, if you will, of a hard-won humility justifying the very need to question and assert.