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Leonard Casper

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## Review Article

### Lyrics for Wind Chimes and Prayer Wheel: Arcellana

LEONARD CASPER

THE FRANCISCO ARCELLANA SAMPLER. By Francisco Arcellana. Quezon City: Rapid Lithographic & Publishing House, for the U.P. Creative Writing Center, 1990.

Contemplating his 1956 Leader Grant to the University of Iowa Writing Center, Franz Arcellana wondered what he should plan to accomplish there. It was suggested that he try to select, from his abundant publications, fourteen stories equivalent to the stations of the Cross, beginning with "Procession" and ending with "Thy Kingdom Come." He reacted enthusiastically, declaring that such a book would make a perfect fortieth-birthday present to himself. He had survived several difficult years as advisor to the *Collegian* and as media-liaison for the University of the Philippines; and he looked forward to rediscovering himself, through creativity, instead of continuing as handy scapegoat for campus politics. He took with him to Iowa his wife and their four children; found time for Filipinos there and for other workshopppers. As important as writing has always been for Franz, his own was never allowed priority over personal friendships and public obligations. As a result, the stations of the Cross design never saw fulfillment: not in Iowa, nor in his *Selected Stories* (1962), nor in *Storymasters* 5 (1973).

Yet if a good man is often hard to find, he is sometimes even harder to lose. Much of the *Francisco Arcellana Sampler*, although in no orderly fashion, does recapitulate the agonized road to Calvary—the price of promised Resurrection; and the very sounds of the *pasyon* occasionally are recaptured. Consequently the external events behind the making of this memorable publication constitute an appropriate chronicle of the difficulties preliminary to that rediscovery sought over thirty years ago. Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio, who replaced Arcellana as director of the U.P. Creative Writing Center, was the first to propose this volume representing sixty years of Franz's literary life: stories, poems, essays, columns. But 1964's Typhoon Yoling had destroyed his

personal collection of books and manuscripts. Tony Serrano fortunately uncovered copies in various libraries and private files, so that Franz was able from these hundreds of items finally to choose fifty-nine. It is the selection itself, however, rather than these circumstances, which best conveys the *passion* interplay of love, death, and transfiguration in this self-portrait of the Philippine quintessence.

Once, in *Writers in Their Milieu* (1987), Franz described himself as "slouching towards Jerusalem," a phrase which he erroneously attributed to novelist Joan Didion (who, like Yeats before her, had written "Bethlehem"), but which through its association with the passion, death, and resurrection of the Christ-Savior perhaps is more significant of the actual direction that Arcellana's life, along with the lives of his familiars, has taken.

Over half the *Sampler* short stories chosen were written when Franz was hardly in his twenties, but the signet of maturity is already pressed into them. The protagonist typically is a young, unmarried male, usually nameless but sometimes carrying parts of Franz's name: Zacarias or Paking. The youth approaches, in joy mingled with fear, girls hardly aware that they attract him. The fear originates in a realization of his own inarticulateness and presumed unworthiness, for what does he substantially have to offer? And also from consideration that the beauty captured in this person, this moment, may not long remain captive. The story that Franz considers most distinctively his is the "Trilogy of the Turtles," with its three episodes of frustration and loss deliberately parodying the "Song of Solomon." For the mating cry of the turtledove Franz substitutes the interior, frantic, weeping cry of the swamp turtle, whose head signifies the solicitous but inhibited male organ, according to the author's comments also in *Writers and Their Milieu*. In that same interview Franz insisted that his central obsession has always been not death but sex. His stories however provide more complex dimensions to that blunt statement.

The young women in "Thy Kingdom Come," "Benediction," "The Coward," "Silent Night, Peaceful Night," and "Carol Carolling" are as closely associated with religious symbols as is Mangan's sister in the imagination of the adolescent narrator who, in James Joyce's famous "Araby," carries her name like a chalice through the vulgar marketplace. Not that Arcellana conceals romanticism behind a facade of piety: nor should one expect piety of an author who, in his own youth, was torn between becoming a Trappist and remaining an agnostic, as he recalls in the *Sampler* interview with Anne Therese Evangelista. But desire can fluctuate between the physical and the spiritual seen as hostile combatants; or it can express both, simultaneously, as *yin-yang* compatibles. Often the result is brief litanies of reverence or a mingling of joyful/sorrowful/glorious mysteries. Even in those other stories where no sanctification-by-association is directly indicated, the women in their innocence represent so untouchable a presence as to risk becoming intangible absences, were it not for the totally persuasive feeling towards them experienced by the self-deprecating but relentless male narrator. Boy and girl hardly converse and never, of course, give name to their desire to be found lovable. They can touch only accidentally and must depend on seemingly irrelevant or trivial

externals—a dead robin; a Disney bunny-doll—to speak the otherwise unspeakable. On occasion (“Moment Musical”; “Alleluia”) music can express that yearning and its fleshless satisfaction. The printed word too offers itself as a substitute for impossible conversation. In “A Marriage Was Made” the eloping couple live on the (faint) hope that his writing will sustain them, but “Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal” reveals a writer whose work becomes an end in itself, separating him from the girl for whom his book was originally to express an enduring dedication.

Reinforcing the hesitant tremulousness of these early stories is their cadence, including the repetitions that represent incises striving, striving! to become outcries; and the typography, the arrangement of these passionate lyrics on the page: so that both ear and eye of the reader are attuned to the temper of the thought. Paragraphs tend to be unusually brief; refrains recur at random or become musical variations of one another: vocal sonatas resonant with restatement, repeats, recapitulation. Arcellana’s vocabulary is too unsophisticated to be confused with that of Wallace Stevens, though the line arrangements may have been influenced by Stevens’ freer verses. But mainly there is, simply, Franz’s affinity for intimating the intensity of passion by its very repression. The result is contemplative, even as it is expressive of emotions. One imagines, recalling Arcellana’s own words in his essays, the silence of sublimated music; or “words of silence” when silence is forced to pass for speech.

The essays are the only uneven part of the *Sampler*; but Arcellana’s attempts in certain essays to separate prose from poetry definitively is, happily, frustrated when one examines his chosen ten poems in conjunction with the prewar stories. Women/blackbirds/prayer/poverty/music: all these images rise from the same tensions (“*The Lord is my shepherd but I want!*”) so clear in those stories that, in his interviews, Franz has had to admit that segregating poetry from prose is at best a critic’s game, not a writer’s concern. The prewar stories involve crises of faith—in one’s worthiness before God, before God-immanent in woman, in one’s pentecostal best—symbolized by fear of emasculation or sterility. All such matters of duress are carefully confined by a discipline which, as Edilberto Alegre properly puts it in *Writers and Their Milieu*, lets Arcellana catch “the shape of the emotion” or “the configuration of the moment.” Or as Franz himself once said: “Art is the dream rising from life as it is . . . the dream made flesh.”

These prewar stories are like “woodwinds in a chaos of brasses,” compared with those of the forties: “Story for My Country” tells of an aged veteran of the Malolos Republic who has tried to live long enough to see a second Republic: Filipinas renewed—a variation on the more personalized vision, in the earlier tales, of a promised land beyond the horizon-to-horizon wasteland. “How to Read” implicitly praises the printed word (to which Franz, a polio victim in the sixth grade, first turned) as a sign of civilization beyond destruction because immeasurable; but “Writer in War” dramatizes the plight of the writer who survives at the expense of losing not only his manuscripts but his typewriter as well: the motif, again, of the tool unused. Dead men can’t write, the friend remarks (therefore elsewhere Franz complains that Manuel Ar-

guilla should not have let patriotism take him to his execution); yet the presumed irreducible here has already been intolerably reduced. "Suffer Little Children" dramatizes an unneighborliness that hastens the death of a man already stricken; in "Motivation" two friends desert a third, as an act of despair: can one really survive a war? (Once Franz said of his father that "He refused to work for the Japanese and without his work he was nothing: his health began to fail and in two years he was dead. I have always regarded him as a casualty of the war." As for himself: "Very nearly didn't survive war; not sure that I did" (*Modern Philippine Short Stories*, 1962).

For Arcellana, love and family remembered have served as the only real alternatives to/compensations for man's mortality. But these are not really separable, as he implies in his most anthologized story, "The Mats," a prewar tale of his father's sense of loss at the death in his arms of a teenage daughter—a tale he is compelled to return to in "The Flowers of May," thirteen years later. Because Franz retains an incredible memory, he is the "resource person" for all those curious about writers in English. It is a memory trained, retentive, and never mean in its implied judgment. But memories can sometimes be unpleasant as well. Among the postwar stories "A Love Story" and "Carol Carolling" seem almost like intruders, because the mixture in them of serenity and ecstasy is more reminiscent of those earlier stories when Franz was so close to the events narrated that memory was hardly involved. More typical of the stories of the fifties are the two versions, a piece, for "The Wing of Madness" (in its second stage, a substantial tale of rage, destruction of a family tortured by Japanese soldiers) and "Divide by Two" (in its second stage, a conflict *between* families which presents clues to the disintegration *within* one family).

Yet even in these two dramatizations of different kinds but not degrees of fury, Arcellana seeks to find a form that will render, but will not surrender to, disorder. The moralist in him still requires that certain values take precedence over satisfaction of personal desire; that literature serve a purpose beyond self-expression; and that the purpose be the enlightenment and advancement of others. He has tried to remain a friend even to those who would use him for their exclusive self-interest. He considers himself the rival of no established writer and an older brother to the young. He wishes, he has said, for time and strength to write narrative confrontations with ugliness, deceit, meanness. Since he has none of these traits himself, he is only reiterating in a special way the value that he put on writing, in 1959, as a result of the Baguio Writers Conference. Adrian Cristobal and Blas Ople had tried to coerce him into signing their politicking petitions, but Franz had a different view of activism. He said that men die but books live; therefore they should be written seriously. The "political action" of a writer is simply to write and write honestly, but never for someone else's empowerment; never manifestoes, the work of hirelings and political hacks, the "In Crowd" / "Closed Circle." "Not program but people; not thesis but human beings": these were his touchstones then; these they remain thirty years later. The *Sampler* shows that Arcellana has become an elder statesman by never pretending to be one.