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## Collected Verse, by Joaquin

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pure and simple. Otherwise self recovery can deteriorate into self-suffocation. Openmindedness will be most clearly signaled when the question "What is Filipino about Filipino literature in English?" can be considered real, rather than rhetorical . . . (p. 133)

In that same essay, Casper pleads for universalism in content as well. Casper writes that if "Filipinism is defined so that Filipinos fall outside the circle of all that is profoundly significant in human nature" that would be the "ultimate alienation" (p. 139).

Attitudes toward the proper relationship between literature and society, so long expressed in doctrinaire or sentimental fashions equally inflexible, seem now to require at least rationalization. And in this process of definition and documentation, modes of reconciliation or at least of pluralistic perspective conceivably may emerge. (p. 133)

It is a tribute to Casper, foreigner that he is, but critic *par excellence* in Philippine literature in English, that in that dialectic, his views of Philippine literature have played a significant role.

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COLLECTED VERSE. By Nick Joaquin. Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 1987. 109 pages.

Nick Joaquin is less known, unfortunately, for his poetry than for his prose—fiction, biography, drama and essay. That is an unhappy quirk of literary history or literary taste, for although Joaquin marches to a different drum than most contemporary Philippine poets in English, his poems rank among the best in postwar poetry in the Philippines. They are classical, intellectual, rhetorical and crafted—words of high praise, though different from the adjectives critics usually ascribe to contemporary poetry on the Philippine literary scene.

Joaquin has written in all the genres. It is a tribute to his versatility and his literary imagination. *Prose and Poems* marked the beginning of the postwar era in Philippine Writing in English (1952). It was followed by *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, still the best Philippine novel in English (1961), *La Naval de Manila and Other Essays*, which established his reputation as an historical essayist (1964). *Tropical Gothic* (1972), *A Question of Heroes* (1977), *Almanac For Manileños* (1979), *Tropical Baroque* (1979), *Cave and Shadows*, which is mistitled as *Caves and Shadows* on the cover of this latest volume (1983), and *The Aquinos of Tarlac* (1983). Later came various biographies, and such works as *Culture and History* (1988) and *The World of Damian Domingo* (1990). Add to this the innumerable journalistic pieces and you have the canon of one of the best writers in English in postwar Philippines.

But one comes back to Joaquin's poetry like an old friend—the rhythm, the language, the classical images, the startling insights. We are doubly blessed that *Collected Verse* is Joaquin's own selection of poems from the mid-thirties (1937) to the present. Like Gemino Abad, I regret the omission of old favorites like "Song Between Wars" and "O Death Be Proud." But those are personal favorites and should not detract from the poet's right to choose his own.

In a short review like this, one can add little to Gemino Abad's Foreword to *Collected Verse*, "Nick Joaquin, Poet at Equinox," which is the best piece of criticism on Joaquin's poetry that I have seen. Abad says that Joaquin's themes are Christian and historical—"our Christian heritage from colonial times and our own deeds . . . by which we forged our history . . ." (p. vii). "Let me arise and follow the river," Joaquin writes in "The Innocence of Solomon," "back to its source" (p. 31). Joaquin brings us back once again to the narrative tradition in English poetry in the Philippines. "We have not really achieved a tradition in narrative from English to match the lyric," Abad says (p. ix), but "with Joaquin's Chronicles and Narratives we have reached new ground, for he is a master story teller and first and last, a poet" (p. x). Finally, Abad says, Joaquin represents a break from the romantic tradition that characterized Philippine poetry in English from 1910 to the war. "Has come the time to break the spell / and find what's real and what's fable" ("Now Sound The Flutes," p. 41). His poems are "sinewy and robust with original imagery and rambunctious, ironic wit" (p. ix).

Joaquin's poems are often deeply scriptural, upon which he erects a structure of Philippine tradition and often deeply religious sensibility. The three masterpieces of narrative verse, to my mind, are "Aramathea's Friday Afternoon," "Coming In From the Cold," and "Equinox For the Governor's Lady", which are rooted in the scriptures of Holy Week and the Pasyon. Though narrated in the third person, they are reminiscent of Browning's soliloquies. Their religious depth is unmistakable. ". . . it's there, the body, still hanging." And Aramathea answers: "We know what we have to do." "And somehow felt renewed. with each step, with each breath / as if reborn from this death" (pp. 5-6). In "Equinox For the Governor's Lady," Pilate's wife tells him: "You said I expected a miracle. What I know / only now is that it happened, it is happening / now, right here, the miracle. . . ." (p. 25). These are not overtly religious poems. Joaquin would surely object to that. But in their intellectual and gently ironic insights, there is the presence of Grace.

I think that is even more true of "The Two Kisses of Eros," which is a magnificent fusion of pagan myth, human perception and deeply religious sensibility. It is my favorite, among all the poems of Joaquin, for its structure, its mythic and religious implications, its flawless language and its depth of human feeling. "Our Lady had always been so merry and winsome" is one of the most startling beginnings of all Joaquin's poems (p. 55). "One summer day, years and years afterwards, / Our Lady remembered that spring evening / of her girlhood" as she waited with the Apostles in the Supper Room. Then "Fire fell on their heads / and all those paschal alumni stood up unconsumed / and were suddenly unafraid." Joaquin ends this magnificent poem in his

own persona: "I, too, will tremble and fall on my knees and exclaim / to the bride of Eros:/ *Ave gratia plena!*" (pp. 55-57) Abad calls these and similar poems in the collection "poems of our Christian heritage." They are more than that; they are deeply spiritual poems. In "Pascua Flamenca" Joaquin writes:

The three Marias move in the Easter dawn:  
 Maria Magdalena bearing her perfumes;  
 Salome, her incense; and Cleofe, her brooms.  
 In chorus they wonder: who shall move the stone?  
 (But I, like Balthasar, am bitter to the bone.  
 I have gone down to the cave, I have seen in the tomb's  
 emptiness, the emptiness that dooms  
 the spiritual Arabia of my own. )

The three Marias weep in the Easter Morning,  
 But their tears are the tears rather of a young bride  
 that trembles, hearing her lord's footfall outside.

But I am Balthasar, cracked with years and learning,  
 lost in a world where all the gods have died;  
 always and everywhere I must see a gibbet burning.  
 (pp. 42-43)

I wonder if the persona of the poet is in that poem as well?

The other strand of Joaquin's poetry is historical. Abad says that "El Camino Real" is the best poem of all—"a deeply moving replay of Joaquin's *A Question of Heroes*. Nothing in our historical and patriotic verse since Justo Juliano's 'Sursum Corda' in 1907 is more real and fabulous, more poignant than Aguinaldo's last night in Palanan" (p. x). I must confess that I do not share Abad's enthusiasm for the poem. It is the only strictly historical poem in the collection and it does not share the profundity of human perception that one finds in what I have called the scriptural narratives. Perhaps one has to be a Filipino to appreciate it.

I think one must admit that Joaquin is a classicist. It is not, perhaps, a complimentary classification in these days of intuitive and phenomenological modernism. But I think it is a title that Joaquin would accept, because it speaks of tradition, of myth, of rhetoric and of craftsmanship—all of which are sum and substance of Joaquin's poetry. Whenever I reread Joaquin, I am always reminded of John Dryden. They are very similar—both in breadth of canon and in their classical approach to literature. The other poet for whom reading Joaquin rings bells is John Donne. Joaquin has the same type of imagery, irony and religious conviction. He uses the same rhetoric as the seventeenth century metaphysical poets.

Let me end with some comments on "Stubbs Road" in which Joaquin has skillfully woven the progression of the seasons and the cycle of the Church's liturgical year. "Summer filled the yard with sunflowers / and the hillsides with tiny bitter blackberries. . . . Winter returned our sunburned heads to declensions / and the Rule of St. Augustine. . . . Spring brought fog and damp

miseries. . . . Spring awoke memories / of the heat and the Passion palms of the homeland; / we ached for the green heat under the palms of the homeland. . . . " (pp. 7-8) It is the literal loneliness of the Filipino away from home, as well as the allegorical loneliness of all men away from Heaven. And Joaquin thinks of "the voice that cried in the wilderness . . . only myself and God to hear me singing in secret: / though I sang at the top of my voice I sang in secret" (p. 8). "The apes have ravished the inner temple, the peacocks rend the sacred veil / and on the manna feast their fill" (p. 31), but Joaquin, "trouvere at night, grammarian in the morning, / ruefully architecting syllables" (p. 34), will "come back to the wilderness / where measured manna falls at dawn" (p. 44).

We have, in *Collected Verse*, a tribute to one of the finest Philippine poets writing in English, and one of the few who has mastered "the alien tongue."

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