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Review Article

Inside the Ends of the Earth: Santos's Heartland

LEONARD CASPER

DWELL IN THE WILDERNESS. By Bienvenido N. Santos. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985. 116 pages.

WHAT THE HELL FOR YOU LEFT YOUR HEART IN SAN FRANCISCO. By Bienvenido N. Santos. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987. 195 pages.

Those of an age and experience proper to the judgment, reflecting on the corruption and violence which they identify with the postwar Philippines, have often argued that the earlier Filipinos were morally superior. Contamination, they explain, was a result of Japanese atrocities, the callousness common to prolonged guerrilla resistance, the daily hardships of "buy and sell," the dilemmas of collaboration-by-degree: all these compounding the ordinary difficulties of survival. The question has taken a sharper form during the eighties. What made the Marcos regime possible; and why do enormous greed and lust for power continue? Are these forces irreversible? Has there indeed been a betrayal of Filipino ideals and dreams, or were these mere philosophical phantoms from the start? Social historians have had to confront regularly questions about the impact of colonialism, the centuries of provincial as well as class elitism, the struggle of Aguinaldo against Bonifacio 100 years ago, the Sakdal movement and other mass conflicts. What is already known about the Philippines before 1941 indicates that it was never a paradise. But was not anticipation of a journey *towards* Eden at one time a reasonable hope; or was Rizal too among the self-deceived?

Others also ponder these questions: What is a Filipino; is there a common cause/condition/attitude, some unchanging center beyond the individual variety naturally expected among 60 million persons? The serious author of

fiction, by dramatic indirection, provides flesh to statistics—not as an ideologue reducing people to illustrations of a preconceived argument and therefore falsifying them; but as empathetic sharer of that flesh. In this effort to place authenticity before polemic, Bienvenido N. Santos has long established his place. His collection of rural stories from the thirties, *Dwell in the Wilderness* (1985), and his novel of wealthy urban expatriates, *What the Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco* (1987), in some ways establish polar opposites in time, place, and economic option. In other ways, however, they may be read for what they imply about possible constants beyond such contrasts. Both then and now, there and here, the “lovely people” lived side by side with the unlovely. Taken all together, they help define what being Filipino, in dream and in deed, might mean.

DWELL IN THE WILDERNESS

Santos's characters from Sulucan and the Bicol who inhabit his retrospective collection of stories are hardly carefree and radiantly blissful. As both the foreword by Leonor Aureus-Briscoe, who chose these eighteen out of ninety-two prewar stories, and the introduction by Doreen Fernandez make clear, these are people in pain. Death is central to at least a third of the stories, whether prematurely caused by poverty, or natural to the human condition. Symbolic death by separation occurs in several more stories about teachers forced to make a living apart from their wives and children (“Schoolhouse in the Foothills”; “The Father”) or inevitably seeing students graduate and go their way (“Tale Told by a Teacher”). Similarly the protagonist in “Kikay—A Maid” feels compelled to desert a mistress who has been virtually a sister to her. Even the rare comic tale, “Days of Grace,” concerns an ancient custom which segregates bride and groom for three frustrating days after their wedding. Still other stories dramatize the torment of loneliness or infidelity.

Despite irony after irony, however, these are basically not tales of complaint or indictment. Even Dulo's wife, in “Transience,” gambling merrily on the occasion of her husband's wake, may deserve understanding more than automatic condemnation. But she is the exceptional person anyway. Rather the tone of the entire collection is established by Selmo in “Child,” who seems unruly, uncaring, until he is followed into the mountains to his mother's embrace among a landscape of burnt-out trees; or by the seemingly oppressive boy in “From Uncle Joe” who is capable of kindness to his victim after all. As in the best of Arguilla or N.V.M. Gonzalez and much of Bulosan, social protest is implied or allowed to proceed not on the basis of abstract equality, Christian or Marxist, but by the demonstration of grace in those who endure. As he was to do later in *You Lovely People* (1955), the young Santos emphasized what the “have-nots” have and what therefore their true worth is. They are memorable for their strengths, rather than their weaknesses; for the grace in them, of family devotion, loyalty to the spirit of place, friendly affection, faith that outlasts frustration. These exist not as ideal goals but as daily, often unconscious, commitments and accomplishments. Leonor Aureus-Briscoe

speaks of "human bondage"; but Santos writes of a bonding beyond bondage. She comes closer to recognizing his achievements when she states that readers may be carried back "to the rain forest of our forebears where human aspirations are deep and elemental": a wilderness less wild for man's dwelling there, a rain forest of fecundity. How does the early Santos manage all this? By restraint, as she points out and as the final story, "Surprise Ending," both asserts and demonstrates. By letting his characters be themselves in the author's seeming absence. Like Mr. Panfilo in "The Barrio Maestro," Santos comes quietly in the night to place his offering inside the visiting saint's image. He is part of the faithful even if he seems aloof or self-assured. It is distinctly Filipino to recognize and serve the needs of others, as the true author serves his characters, not the reverse.

A secondary because less subtle device that emerges in Santos's commemoration of feelings "deep and elemental," natural to the wilderness, is his direct contrast between rural and urban values in his two "Tales for a City Friend" and in "My City, What Next?" Although one can learn something of life's purpose wherever one lives, Daraga is clearly preferable to Sulucan in these stories—as presumably for years it was for Santos himself. The motif of compulsive return to the pastoral life, which shaped *Brother, My Brother* (1960), figures also in "Surprise Ending": the American teacher who promised her country students that she would return does so finally, if years later.

WHAT THE HELL FOR YOUR LEFT YOUR HEART IN SAN FRANCISCO

The judgments implicit/explicit in *Dwell in the Wilderness* are prophetic of and commensurate with many that appear in *What the Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco*. For example, affirmation of Philippine traditions and the contrast of simple origins with the "Unreal City" reappear. The novel's narrator, David Dante Tolosa, is hired by *nouveau riche* Filipino professionals in San Francisco as the potential editor of a magazine which they plan to publish for overseas Filipinos (more than a million legal immigrants in the United States alone). The idea is the brainchild of Dr. Pacifico Sotto—perhaps in part to compensate for his having left Estela, his actual but grossly deformed child, back in the Philippines; and perhaps in part, since he specializes in vasectomies, to prove symbolically his ability to generate rather than merely frustrate new life. David devotes months to designing a publication unlike the music-movie fan magazine he once edited in Manila and equally unlike so many Philippine-American newspapers which disproportionately attend to social functions, beauty queens, high school graduations and celebrity-worshipping. Unfortunately, the wealthy doctors and businessmen also have a narrow view of culture. They will throw conspicuously wasteful parties; but the capital outlay and editorial seriousness of a first-class magazine only dismay them. As a generalization, the social criticism in Santos's novel is sharply directed and wholly deserved.

Two couples, however, transcend the shallow sameness of these others, and they do so because they suffer, are humbled by that suffering, and finally learn lessons of unselfish love. David spends some time with his former professor, Arturo Jaime, and through him finds a part-time teaching position at City College. Jaime has long been tolerant of his two daughters' near-contempt for Philippine customs of respect and moderation, until they literally throw pillows at his sacred images. Then he drives them from the house permanently—only to discover after both become pregnant how lonely their absence leaves him and how deeply he cares for Lila and Donna. The reader is prepared for this love-discovery by recalling Jaime's sensitivity to the "cried poems" of his wife's patient, Patty Grand, though he could not stop her from suicide. The Sottos are more fortunate. Their hopelessly grotesque daughter was left in the Philippines as an infant because they would have had neither the time nor the finances, as young interns in America, to devote themselves to her. But they are never wholly absorbed by the trivial interests of their fellow physicians; and eventually they bring Estela to San Francisco and claim her publicly. Her special delight is the panoramic view of the city from her parents' home on Diamond Heights. The prognosis for her physical recovery is not favorable. Yet she is cherished without reservation.

Santos's placement of Estela at the novel's start and finish, as well as increasingly within the narrator's consciousness, is a clear indication that he intends her to epitomize the novel's central experience as surely as the horrific smell of hides became the privileged symbol in *Villa Magdalena* (1965). And perhaps both propose a single insight: to be human is to be part profane, part divine; more specifically in this later novel, the national identity is a mix of the Filipino at his worst and the Filipino at his best. (Part of David's research leads him to Horacio de la Costa's famous remarks on the inescapably heterogeneous heritage of Filipinos and acceptance of this conglomerate ethos). Santos, through David, is invoking a compelling love neither naive nor romantic but fully informed; a love for, or faith in, one's self and in others despite all defects. But to profess that tolerance too readily can subvert whatever wisdom self-analysis otherwise might provide, perverting it into a form of self-justification and resistance to responsibility and improvement.

It becomes important, therefore, to examine carefully David's humility at novel's end. What has he discovered; how has it affected him? He says that "like you, Estela, we carry our own deformities as nobly as we can, but unlike you, we hide them well." What are David's "deformities" and how candidly does he acknowledge them? Can he survive them? Does he simply accede to "the smell of old age and decay" which he begins to notice everywhere; or does he actually mature, finding this smell (like the odorous *Medallada* hides) only one part of life's total reality?

The narrative line rises with David's expectations that he will be allowed to edit a magazine of significance; and falls when the tentative backers refuse to finance him. Is it David's desperate need to survive in San Francisco, or is it his limited intelligence which prevents him from foreseeing that the entire project will collapse prematurely? (Santos himself, as author of

works reprinted three decades after their first limited edition was exhausted, bitterly knows that too many Filipinos at home and abroad are expert conversationalists but rarely serious readers.) David seems to be a stranger to his own culture; and the fact that he is the novel's exclusive narrator enlarges the consequences of his drastically inadequate sensitivity, both as medium and as person.

What brought David Tolosa to America, principally, was his obsessive search for his father who disappeared there a few years after David's birth in 1938. He is convinced that he can never know himself fully until he knows his father. It is easy to connect this search for self-identity with this wanting to name the Sotto-group magazine *Filipino*. For cultural critics it has become commonplace to relate the question of personal and national identity in terms of who the true father/ancestor is of both. In one of the most remarkable scenes in the novel, David dreams that he does find his father, only to be told by him that he is David's son. That scene can be taken to mean that David should stop looking for himself in the *there* and *then*. The past is everpresent and is discernible therefore in the *here* and *now*. In the case of most peoples of the world, the multiplicity of pasts/fathers has to be accepted, along with responsibility for one's own decisions and behavior. Such an interpretation would be compatible, in turn, with the Sotto's accepting Estela as she is and with David's having to define Filipinos as *they* are, imperfect, complicated, various. . . . In these portions of his novel Santos is affirming the need for patience and tolerance; for a humility that requires judgments to be thoughtful and loving, not rash, not harsh, not absolute. For the sake of character certification, however, one still must ask whether David earned this wisdom or had it injected in him by the author; and whether or not he can act on it resolutely and successfully.

Santos mastered the short story long ago, as the samples chosen for *Dwell in the Wilderness* prove. Yet his attempts at longer forms have all been flawed.¹ The least novelistic of Santos's long works is *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor* (1983). Its central figure, Solomon King, wanders through parts of the United States after retirement, to visit old friends. He is a figure rather than a true character because he travels widely, but does not grow within himself. At heart he is immobilized. There is nothing therefore in the events as a series to drive the reader forward. Most of the chapters can be approached from any direction. The function of King, as a virtual nonperson, is to provide the appearance of linkage among the portraits of Filipinos along the way. The result is a collection of loosely ordered anecdotes and tales, not much more rational in their sequence than *You Lovely People* (which Santos considers a group of stories, despite the intermittent reappearance of several characters). Even as a *tour de force* representing King's aimlessness, it suffers when the fugue of interchapters filled with fruitless dialogue abruptly

1. See the author's "Great Shouting and Greater Silences: The Novels of Bienvenido N. Santos" in *Firewalkers: Literary Concelebrations, 1964-1984*; and "Paperboat Novels: The Later Bienvenido Santos," *Solidarity* 104/105 (1985): 148-52.

ceases midway.

What the Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco is not a "paste job," as is its predecessor. Yet neither is it tightly integrated, despite its ostensible chronology. Estela is briefly introduced at once, then forgotten for half the book. Except for occasional flashbacks—resumés of other people's lives—the narration is confined to David Dante Tolosa and therefore depends on a consistent attentiveness which, unfortunately, he is too distracted by narrowness of purpose to provide. The thematic connection between certain epiphanies proffered him but never wholly appreciated has already been shown. In his wanderings through the city he has the opportunity to measure those marginal Filipinos who, nevertheless, are "lovely people" against those people of wealth whom he eventually calls "the proud ones" and who he implies are vacuous. Such contrasts support the liberal attitude which made David from the start want to have *Filipino* closer to the heart than to exhibitionism, in its feature articles. Among the marginals, of special importance is Tingting, an old-timer who has kept in athletic shape; a once-famous tennis champion who nevertheless needs neither praise nor glory to be himself. David cannot help wishing this man were his father; and, of course, as a model of quiet certitude from the past, in some ways he is a father figure.

Even Judy, although she is American, represents the hospitality idealized by Filipinos.² All day she begs for quarters, then brings sandwiches to the homeless in the condemned building where they take shelter. (To that extent she resembles the Pinoy's devoted American wife in Santos's famous story, "Scent of Apples.") But why does she choose David, out of all San Francisco's vagrants, to take "home"? David who is no handsome Robert Taylor or narcissistic Solomon King does not ask why, but seems to accept this inexplicable invitation as an erotic fantasy that ought to be allowed to run its course without question; a fantasy reminiscent of the "clairvoyant" stranger in an earlier episode who, claiming to know him, invites David into her bed for an "amazing lay." What ultimately rescues David's passing relationship with Judy from being an "obligatory" sexual indulgence or deviation from the novel's course (as, for example, the Tamara tomato orgy appears to be) is the fact that she is romanticized not physically but spiritually. Her body, like that of the carnal clairvoyant, is scarred, covered with blemishes and open sores. Her purpose seems to be to offer not sexual release but homely comfort. (This role she shares with the French woman who, in her own bedroom, is content to have David write on her blackboard all the names of his native vernaculars.)

Underdeveloped as a person, yet Judy is a presence, an earth-mother figure who even smells like the spices in the kitchen of David's mother. Consequently, it is not wholly anomalous that with her and through her he dreams of finding his father. That is, he realizes that he has found *himself*, naturally

2. The erosion of Philippine hospitality was one of the major themes of Santos, commenting on his novel in Washington, D.C., 1 June 1988, according to the *Philippines News*, 17-23 August edition.

in mid-process and therefore still incomplete. But if she is a mother figure, providing access-by-association to the father figure as well as to David's self-acceptance, why must she seem more personification than person? Is it male chauvinism on David's part or the author's oversight that never allows David to recollect in any detail the actual mother with whom he lived for years? (For that matter, what should one make of David's early confusion of vasectomy with castration? And is there some hidden reason that in his late forties he remains unmarried; or that we never learn much about his first and only real love who somehow failed him and on whose picture he regularly urinates?) Why is the father made almighty by an author who, throughout a long career, has proven to be equally and generously empathetic with women as well as with men? The females in this novel tend to be deprived of their humanity. They remain ambiguous, figurative representations of forces unintelligible and uncertain, attractive to David largely for the use that—always temporarily—he has for them. For a novel to be realistic, its characters should be realized as persons before flowering into allegory. This deformity goes unrecognized.

Every novel of profound purpose undoubtedly leaves mysteries in its wake: life goes on, not everything is resolved; and the more real characters persist and flourish in the reader's own creative sensibility. Nevertheless, in the interim a novel should have internal consistency. The problem with *What the Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco* is that even the friendly critic finds himself straining to see cohesive patterns, a singular whole, in a work that just as often wants to fly apart. The principal source of the problem is David himself, who as narrator ultimately should provide a sense of integrated experience, however complicated and open-ended. Here the narrative action can give only the *illusion* of suspense. Any knowledgeable reader will predict the failure of the proposed magazine, and indeed is told on the first page that David's dream will fade. Furthermore, almost all of the journalistic planning, the itemized preediting of the magazine *Filipino*, is cursory; as dull and unrevealing as a weekly shopping list. The entrance of Estela and the regret of Jaime for banishing his daughters do provide the narrative with some forward thrust. But what is most substantial and memorable in the novel still depends not on continuity or development but on Santos's brief, incisive portrayals of persons as potential feature article material for his magazine. When the author passes beyond character profiles and moves to penetrate the inner person, *there* is the heartland. *There* is Santos at his best, not mere historian of Pinoy life or entertaining raconteur or predictable social critic of the "Unreal City." *There* is the Santos who can justify the ways of the writer to his true and universal audience; who is not less Filipino for having changed his citizenship out of fear of Marcos's vengeance (as a Pampangueño, he had been close to Diosdado Macapagal). A man beyond fashion and even ordinary passion.

Perhaps out of a desire to respond to his novel's call to humility (a difficult task for a celebrity-author lionized so often, early and late), or perhaps as a disarming tactic of self-defense, Santos has David refer to his chronicle of events as "random notes." *What the Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco* in fact can be admired as a tour de force, a collection of draft feature

articles which constitute the magazine developing in David's mind. Nevertheless, were one to follow the technical virtuosity through to its fullest human implications, one would discover that the definition of a Filipino, like the magazine named *Filipino*, is not random, though it will always remain tentative because ongoing; and it will have many sections and many issues. That largeness of vision which wants to rise from this novel is challenged by a contradiction. The more that David lives with and learns about Estela, Judy, Tingting, the Sottos, the Jaimes, and numerous "nameless ones," the more he finds them lovable for their struggle towards goodness. Their *caritas* begins to stir *agape* in him, replacing *eros*. That will to virtue is the true heartland, Santos implies; the only culture worth cultivating, regardless of nationality or latitude and longitude. Why then does David give up so easily?

Where in the world can he go, to avoid the ambivalences that he sees played out in San Francisco? Eden was lost so long ago. And why, with authority antithetical to humility, does he condemn all but a few of "the proud ones"? David wholly misjudged the ability of his Philippine-American students to close the alleged generation gap, as their final school program shows; and in the Dr. Tablizo anecdote, crusty old grandfather and freewheeling granddaughter eventually make their peace. Had David not fled, had he come to know more of his Philistine countrymen, perhaps his judgment of them might have been tempered. There may be other Sottos whom David will never experience because he dismisses them with prejudicial labels. So they become opportunities lost—to find himself more fully, more permanently, through some of them at least; to mature more completely into the father of the overgrown *naif* that he has remained so long; to exceed the "forever child" as he lovingly calls Estela, who is entranced by her overview of the city until a telescope reduces its remoteness and makes her confront reality—as we always must—person to person, particle by particle.

San Francisco is the world compressed. It can be one "hell of a city," in the supposed words of David's father; or a purgatory, where better and worse together writhe towards perfection in what Flannery O'Connor once called "grace under construction"; what it must *not* be is limbo, the wasteland of flat refusal. San Francisco is life and, as David remarks, "Surely, we're all going to leave our hearts here when the time comes to move on." If there is not life after birth, what should one expect after death? So many people disappeared, are allowed to disappear, are made to disappear in this novel. David barely finds a few people, really finds them, before letting them go. They become no more real for him than his "amazing lays," those he used and refused to remember, without regret.

One wonders what kind of a heartland might be inhabited and described by Father Belarmino who, like David, also wanders from place to place but with a mission that is generous, generative: to rebuild his church in the Philippines; and maybe meanwhile he builds an invisible Church Militant in the middle of his journeying. One can only wonder; never know. For David he is just another face among a whole multitude let slip across the vision's brief horizon—even as David complains about the loss of the Philippine tradition of togetherness.