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Satire in Carlos Bulosan's *The Laughter of my Father*

DELFIN L. TOLENTINO, JR.

Carlos Bulosan's *The Laughter of my Father* was first published by an American publishing house in 1944. The war had not yet come to an end. Writing to Ann Dionisio from Los Angeles on 3 May 1944,¹ the Filipino expatriate writer happily announced that the first edition of his book had already been sold out, that a second edition of 15,000 copies had just been printed, and that so far all reviews had been favorable. Later, he added that the book was being read and broadcast overseas to soldiers on the front by the Office of War Information in New York. He also noted that the Filipino government seemed to have no interest in the book whatsoever.

These last two remarks are indicative of two things. That *The Laughter of my Father* should have been used as broadcast material during the war points to the fact that the book was initially well received, not because of its serious intent but because of its entertainment value. That it should have been largely ignored in the Philippines, on the other hand, points to the fact it was initially considered irrelevant to the local situation.

More than ten years after its first publication, the nature of the reception first accorded to the book remained the same, for in 1955, Bulosan was apparently still ill at ease with the way his book was being read. In a letter to Florentino B. Valeros, he wrote:

My politico-economic ideas are embodied in all my writings . . . Here let me remind you that *The Laughter of my Father* is not humor; it is satire; it is indictment against an economic system that stifled the growth of the

1. Carlos Bulosan, *Sound of Falling Light: Letters in Exile*, ed. Dolores S. Feria (Quezon City: n.p., 1960, pp. 208-9.

primitive, making him decadent overnight without passing through the various stages of growth and decay. The hidden bitterness in this book is so pronounced in another series of short stories, that the publishers refrained from publishing it for the time being.²

It is easy to surmise from this explanation that the book—and the author—suffered from misinterpretation. Americans, for whom *Laughter* was primarily written, took interest in the tales it contains perhaps because of their simple comic appeal, perhaps because of their exotic charm, and the book must have been approached as if it were an item from a curio shop: the quaint and clever product of an Oriental artisan.

Yet, as Bulosan had explained, behind the humor is an "indictment," behind the comic mask is a face pained by the gross inequities of the world. *The Laughter of my Father* was written as satire and should therefore be appraised as such.

THE SATIRIC MODE

Satire as a literary term defies easy definition. Though it can be and is, in fact, often considered a distinct genre, it is a genre in a different sense from such forms as the ode or sonnet. It has been suggested that satire can be more accurately conceived as a mode or attitude which may appear in a number of genres such as the fable or the novel.³

As a literary genre, satire is "the expression in adequate terms of the sense of amusement or disgust excited by the ridiculous or unseemly, provided that humor is a distinctly recognizable element, and that the utterance is invested with literary form."⁴ This definition implies what Northrop Frye considers as the two indispensable elements of satire: wit or humor, and criticism.⁵ Some analysts of the form would discount wit or humor as an absolute necessity in satire, arguing that some satirical pieces are not funny at all. Highet, for example, proposes two categories of satire: in the first, wit and humor are present; in the second, only vituperation and bitterness.⁶ But common to all satires is

2. Ibid., p. 272.

3. M.N. Liberman and Edward E. Foster, *A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1968), p. 105.

4. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. XIX, p. 1082.

5. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 224.

6. Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 235.

the element of criticism, and the satiric sense of life may be described as critical. For the satirist, evil exists in the world, and this evil must be exposed and eliminated.

In *The Laughter of my Father*, wit or humor plays a most prominent role, with the critical element so subtly integrated into the comic texture that it is often not immediately recognizable. For his purposes, Bulosan has chosen the short story (in its traditional sense as a short narrative in prose) as his medium. There are twenty-four stories in this collection. As a totality, these stories may be said to comprise a novel.

Though the title of the book and the stories themselves play up the role of the father, the central figure in the whole work, in a sense, is not the clever father and man of wit but the son, the young Ilocano boy, through whose consciousness and sensibility is filtered the rich material of the narrative, the woes and travails of an Ilocano family in Pangasinan during the first decades of the century. The young boy is only four years old when the book begins. When the book ends, he is already a young man, still quite naive but also quite learned in the ways of the world. *The Laughter of my Father* is not really the story of his father but the story of his development, his apprenticeship, and in this sense, it is much like a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of education,⁷ a portrait of the Filipino boy growing up in a harsh and cruel world.

TENSION BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW

The first story in the collection is entitled "My Father Goes to Court" and it begins quietly thus:⁸

When I was four, I lived with my mother and brothers and sisters in a small town in the island of Luzon. Father's farm had been destroyed in 1918 by one of our sudden Philippine floods, so for several years afterward we all lived in the town, though he preferred living in the country.

Right from the start, the author is beginning to usher us into a world full of tension. That the father is at once characterized as a man who prefers to live in the country marks him out as a figure

7. Epifanio San Juan, Jr. notes that *Laughter* is essentially such a novel "though circumscribed by a particular location and confined to a limited stratum." *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1972), p. 24.

8. The text used is the 1944 edition published by Harcourt, Brace and Company.

representing tradition and, by extension, the old society. When such a man is placed in a society undergoing radical transformation, conflict is bound to ensue. In the first story, the boy narrator tells us that while residing in town, they had as neighbor a rich man who kept his children indoors all the time, while he (the young boy) and his brothers and sisters played out in the sun. The rich man's children grew pale and sickly, while they became robust and strong. Noticing this, the rich man filed a complaint in court against them, accusing the poor family of "stealing the spirit of his wealth and food." In court, the father defended himself and his family without any lawyer, proudly declaring that they had no need for one. During the interrogation, he made no attempt to refute the charges aired against his family, to the surprise of everyone in the courtroom. Then, in a brilliant case of giving one a dose of his own medicine, the father walked over to a room across the hall and there jingled a hatful of coins, after which he strode back to the courtroom. "Did you hear it?" he asked the complainant. The complainant answered yes. "Then you are paid," said the Father. "Case dismissed," said the judge. In this story, we have an illustration of how the father tries to adapt himself to new institutions. His rejection of a lawyer's help signifies his lack of faith in the institutionalized machinery of justice. The court's willingness to entertain so absurd a complaint as the rich man's made it an object of ridicule, and the ridicule is in the Father's witty way of extricating himself and his family from the offense they had been charged with.

In the second story, "The Soldiers Came Marching," the boy narrator immediately announces the loss of his innocence:

I was a month old when the first World War was declared, but the sound of distant guns shook away my childhood. I grew up quickly and found that my brother Polon was one of the 25,000 volunteers in the Philippine National Guard that fought in Europe. Suddenly the war came and suddenly it ended. Then my childhood was gone forever.

The war had just ended and the soldiers had gone back to their hometowns. The war veterans quickly lapsed into lethargy, spending whole days sleeping and being idle. To help them, the Father put up a wine store which catered to "Ex-Service Men Only." One day, the servant of Don Rico, the richest man in town, went to the store and ordered some wine, but the Father refused to serve him. Don Rico himself later came and threatened the Father,

but the old man was not to be so easily intimidated. The wine store was later burned by one of Don Rico's men. In retaliation, the soldiers mobilized many other veterans from neighboring towns and together they stood under Don Rico's house and sang the whole day, "disturbing his sleep and his conscience." Seeing that neither his personal power nor the power of the town council which was under his control could do anything about the situation, Don Rico finally yielded and ended up paying for the damages and expenses of the soldiers. Later he "became insane and hanged himself with a rope. His tongue was sticking out when the servants found him." This is of course a case of poetic justice, since justice for the poor in actual life did not come easily in the society which Bulosan knew. The author's sympathy is clearly for the less fortunate ones, and the contempt he has for exploitative men of wealth and power is nowhere more starkly pictured than in his grotesque description of Don Rico's death.

THE PITFALLS OF THE NEW CULTURE

Two consecutive stories, "My Mother's Boarders" and "The Gift of my Father," are related in theme. In the first, the boy narrator tells of the construction of a school annex in town to accommodate the soldiers' children who had been multiplying in number, and the recruitment and arrival in town of three young women teachers from the city. The story describes the changes brought about by their coming. The people, upon learning modern dances from the teachers, suddenly became wild over them. As the boy puts it, "the young men became loose with their morals" and "the girls started having children like the soldiers, and the town council was horrified." The young teachers were eventually ousted. In the second story, the central event is the arrival of Porton, the boy's cousin, who had brought with him a wife from America. The people made a lot of fuss over the strange woman, looking at her as if she were a goddess. Gifts from all over were showered on the couple, and the father, finding himself with nothing to offer, decided to give the newly-arrived couple his house in the country. He might have earned the gratitude of Porton and his wife, but he also incurred the wrath of his wife who struck him and said, "This is my gift." In these two stories, Bulosan is satirizing the Filipino's tendency to impress other

people, especially foreigners. In "My Mother's Boarders," the villagers' zealous attempt to learn—rather indiscriminately—from the young city women led to their moral degeneration; in "The Gift of my Father," the Father's zealous attempt to please and impress led to the loss of his property. The first kind of loss is spiritual; the second is material, but they are the same in the sense that both happened in that moment when the native was false to himself, that moment when the native turned his back on his roots, that is, when he let an alien culture supercede his own.

The theme of a new culture superceding the old, and the old reacting to the new dispensation, can also be seen in "The Tree of my Father." The boy narrator begins with a little explanation:

While I was still living in the village with Father, the Insular Government of the Philippines had nothing to do with our lives. We made our own laws and obeyed them willingly; but we did not write them down for the proper authorities to verify. These laws were handed verbally from one generation to another, and we never questioned their sources or validity. Afterward men of a new type came to our village and settled among us; but they started questioning our unwritten laws. They began a series of serious controversies over the ownership of land.

He then goes on to tell how the original land cultivators were dispossessed of their property by the new settlers who "were skillful in finding loopholes" in their oral laws and who therefore "become rich and powerful by mere technicalities." The father himself was almost victimized when a settler claimed as his own, a *bangar* tree separating his land from theirs, a problematic situation which was artificially resolved when the tree being claimed was accidentally burned down.

In "The Capitalism of my Father," it is the economic aspect of the new order that is dissected. In 1921, the tobacco business in the country was resumed with American capital. In the eyes of the young boy, this new economic set-up had a profound effect on human relationship:

Our town had never dealt with tobacco before, so the farmers did not get wise for a long time. They were also expert in cheating and lying, but my brother was one rung above them. They cheated themselves when they could not cheat their neighbors. It was like that in our town when I was growing up. You had to be a good cheat or nothing at all. Every boy and girl grew up with the desire to cheat or to tell a lie. It was a part of our education into life.

His brother Osong had become a sort of middleman between the American capitalists and the farmers, and the boy tells us of how his brother cheated left and right until he became the victim of his own clever tactics. In an ending full of wisdom, we find Osong running back to their house:

'You have ruined my career, Father,' he said.

'Since when did you have a career?' Father said.

'I had dreams of becoming rich without working hard for it,' he said. 'I saw it coming when I started weighing the bales of tobacco. I saw it in every false figure that I wrote in my book. Now I'll have to look for another job.'

'There is nothing better than honest work,' Father said.

'And be like Uncle Burcio?' my brother said. 'He had worked for thirty-five years straight—but where is he now? Under the grass—dead. Only dishonest men rise to riches and power in the world. Dolts and idiots and men like that work for them.'

'I would rather be a clown than a cheat,' I said.

'You don't know anything,' my brother said to me. 'Wait till you are old enough to know the importance of money.'

Of all the stories in the collection, this tale has one of the saddest endings. The awareness that honesty is still an ideal but is no longer feasible in a world which thrives on money is a painful one, and we can imagine with what force and sharpness this knowledge must have impinged on the young boy's developing sensibility.

In "The Politics of my Father," Bulosan takes a close look at rural politics and through the picture that he paints we get a glimpse into the nature of the political machinery that is at work in Philippine society. It was election time and several candidates were running for town president. One was a judge who gave dole-outs to earn votes. Another was a woman who also exploited the material needs of the people to gain their support. The third was an Americanized Filipino who made his Texan wife do a burlesque act in the hope that he would thus win the support of the men in town. The winner turned out to be an uncle of the young boy narrator, and his satiric portrait of his uncle politician suffices to show what kind of men were at the helm of local politics:

My uncle was a gambler by profession and by the standards of our town he was a good man. He was judged by the mirrors in his house, the size of his gold teeth, and the number of his godchildren. Sometimes he was judged by the number of children he had, which was fourteen, including the one that died at birth.

EXAGGERATIONS AND CARICATURES

The materialism brought about by the new economic structure also permeated such institutions as the Church, and Bulosan devotes a tale, "My Father Goes to Church," to expose certain truths about this. The family of the young boy had been the victim of disaster for three consecutive years (their rice field was severely damaged, their house was burned down and one of the girls in the family died), and the Father was being blamed for all the catastrophes. He never went to church, he was sinful, was the charge of their relatives. Acceding to his wife's insistent demand that he purge himself of his sins, the Father decided to go to church:

'Where are you going, Simeon?' Mother asked.

'See the priest,' Father said.

'Today is Friday,' Mother said.

'Is there a special day to see the priest?' Father asked.

'Sunday is the day,' Mother said.

'And one thing more,' Mother said. 'Take a gift with you for the priest.'

'What for?' Father asked.

'It's the right thing to do.'

'I've heard he is already very fat and rich,' Father said.

'It's the way it's done anyway.'

'It's the roundabout way to reach God,' Father said.

'It has always been done that way and it will always be done that way.'

On the way to the church, father and son met a half-crazy goatherd who gave them a goat which the father decided to offer to the priest as his gift. When they arrived in church, the old man asked his son to remain outside with the goat and to wait until the Mass was over, but the young boy grew impatient and decided to enter the church even before the end of the Mass. Near-bedlam followed as "the extreme heat forced out the strong animal smell of the goat" and the beast started to cry and jump up and down the aisle. This story may be taken as an exercise in exaggeration and the portrait of the priest and the Church may be taken as an exercise in caricature. Both devices—exaggeration and caricature—are natural aspects of local folk humor and both are also legitimate elements of satire. We find them not only in this story but in many others—for example, "My Father and the White Horse," "My Father's Love Potion," "My Father and the Fighting Ram,"

"My Father's Political Appointment"—which relate the father's escapades and the son's apprenticeship and introduction to the world.

In the last story, which is also the title story, "The Laughter of my Father," the narrator, now no longer a naive child, but an adolescent on the brink of manhood, tells us of the events that drove him out of the country. He and his father had gone to attend a wedding feast in the next town, and by some force of circumstance, the young man got a chance to be alone with the bride. The girl had forgotten something in her house across the river and had asked the young man to accompany her, but on their way back, she slipped off the wooden bridge and got wet. She went back to the house and put on fresh clothes. When they returned to the dancing pavilion where the wedding festivities were being held, the guests started speculating about what had happened. The event stirred the imagination of the Father who had earlier been worried by the fact that his youngest son was not virile enough:

He used to boast that his five sons were honey to the girls because he touched them at birth, by which he meant that he has bequeathed his *anting-anting*, or talisman, which was what women fell for. Women had flocked to him when he was my age, he always claimed. Now he said dreamily, 'I remember, I didn't touch one of my sons Could it be you?'

His son's innocent flirtation with the girl drove him to proclaim unabashedly to the crowd that his son had "done it," a daring remark which naturally outraged the people. The wedding was postponed. One week afterwards, the girl's father came to their house, claiming that the young man had deflowered his daughter, that the young man therefore ought to marry her. But the lad's father had grander plans for his son. He promised the girl's family that he would let them know his decision in three days. In this short span of time, the father gathered all his savings, prepared everything for his son's departure, and then hurriedly sent him off to America. "Remember," he said, "remember in America that I am your father. Don't forget *I touched you at birth*." Thus ends the young man's apprenticeship under his good old clever father.

THE CRAFT OF SATIRE

E. San Juan remarks that Bulosan's use of satire enables him to reflect "the contradictory movement of reality without, on the one hand, lapsing into surrealistic abstractions, and on the other, naively foisting on others the surface texture of experience as the incontrovertible truth."⁹ This achievement basically stems from the author's ironic vision. Bulosan sees reality as a web of complexity, a tangled mass of contradictions. To understand this, one must first probe and unravel the mysterious forces at work in the lives of men as they move in their own societies.

In his book, *The Plot of Satire*, Alvin B. Kernan says that:

. . . satire always contains either an implicit or explicit set of values, which frequently takes specific form in judgment . . . If a system of values tends to stand out in satire, so does the style—so much so, in fact, that it is regularly referred to as rhetoric, a term ordinarily applied only to style which calls attention to itself or which is obviously designed to persuade.¹⁰

It is the outstanding merit of *The Laughter of my Father* that it is never rhetorical, that its satiric style is consistently subtle. Bulosan's choice of a young boy as narrator is not just an expedient device for investing his tales with a certain degree of freshness and captivating simplicity. It is also a device to create aesthetic distance and objectivity. The young boy's consciousness and sensibility have not yet fully developed, and this fact explains why he often strikes us as a dispassionate observer of people and events. He could not possibly have fully involved himself in something whose meaning he has not yet adequately grasped. This kind of distance enables him to present what appears to us as an objective picture of the social reality that Bulosan saw and experienced, although we do know that the material had already been filtered through his consciousness and is therefore selected and not impartial.

Behind his realistic candor, Bulosan evidently has a romantic attachment to his rural past which to him represents the native culture that collapsed under the new dispensation. He satirizes the new order, the new culture, but only to the extent that these dehumanize people and divest them of those qualities which make them whole and intact as they struggle against their fate.

9. E. San Juan, *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* p. 40.

10. Alvin Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965),