

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The White Horse Dancing

Joseph A. Galdon

Philippine Studies vol. 26, no. 4 (1978) 437–443

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Review Article

The White Horse Dancing

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

DANCE A WHITE HORSE TO SLEEP AND OTHER STORIES. By Antonio Enriquez. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1977. 330 pages. Cloth \$13.95 / Paper \$6.95.

The White Horse in the title story of this collection by Antonio Enriquez is not really dancing, except in a manic dance of fear. It snorts wildly and prances, and then bolts and tramples the bystanders and races away from the chaos it has sown at the funeral of papalolo. Nor is it a dance to sleep. It is a macabre dance of death for papalolo who was ninety-eight years old. He fought against the Americans, had big lands and many cattle and four riding horses for himself, and they were all white.

Papalolo decapitated three Americans with one stroke of his bolo at Canelar in the Filipino-American War, and General Aguinaldo sent him a medal from Cavite for it. Papalolo stabbed a witch through the heart on the road to San Jose, and he scolded a giant in a santol tree for letting his feet dangle across the path. The old tenants said that papalolo could not die because of the *anting-anting* imbedded in one of his arms. Dr. Dayrit gave papalolo only a week to live and "now it is going on three months, and he's still alive" (p. 177).

But papalolo finally died and the dancing white horse ran away. Now all that is left are three spinster daughters with no hope of children, an old decaying house, and relatives who fight over his coffin and his money and his property and his electric shaver and his cane with the medallion of St. Christopher. The barrenness of the past and the ironic repudiation of life is complete when the family chases away from the wake of death "the itinerant businessman with no roots here" (p. 184), the suitor of cousin Bibing who "has a lover after ten-fourteen years of drought grasping this last chance before her flower wilts and dries" (p. 184). Tia Clara says: "What! Have you forgotten your own heritage the moment a man lays his hand on

your rump?" (p. 182). It is this Faulknerian theme of death in the past and repudiation of life in the present that pervades the stories of Antonio Enriquez. Nick Joaquin finds life in the past; Enriquez finds only death in it, because it refuses to accept the present.

This volume of stories by Antonio Enriquez is the second significant contribution to Philippine Literature by the University of Queensland Press in its series on Asian and Pacific Writing. The first was *Tropical Gothic* by Nick Joaquin. The editors of the series, Michael Wilding and Harry Aveling, deserve a special note of commendation for making these two volumes available. It is to be hoped that further volumes of Philippine writing will follow in the series.

BASIC CONFLICT

Antonio Enriquez is from Zamboanga and is a product of Silliman University, which he uses either as setting or background for several of the stories in this collection. His earlier volume, *Spots On Their Wings*, from which several of the stories included here have been reprinted, was published in 1973. The basic conflict in many of his stories is neatly summarized in the cover blurb:

The setting of these tales is the island of Mindanao, its principal city of Zamboanga, and the many rural and coastal barrios. Here, as if in a medieval landscape, the mere width of a river or the crossing of a mountain brings the characters face to face with cultures and languages different from their own. Violence and raw misunderstanding are at the heart of many of the stories, particularly where Muslim confronts Christian, where city-dweller faces the traditions of farmer and fisherman. There are quieter moments, too, particularly in childhood scenes where the Filipino landscape, part paradise, part hell, is both backdrop and protagonist in the action described.

Enriquez's basic theme in all of his stories is the conflict of old and new, strange and familiar, change and tradition.

There are eighteen stories in the present collection. Ten or eleven of them might be called Zamboanga or Mindanao stories, for they have Mindanao as their setting and are primarily concerned with conflicts of old and new, and tribal and urban values. Eight or nine of them depict what might be called "The Family Under Siege." Three of the eighteen are Silliman stories, for they have the university as setting or as background for theme. A final set of four stories includes the Moro stories, concerned with the conflict of Muslim and Christian. We shall return to this division a little later in our discussion of theme.

ORIGINS AND INFLUENCE

Enriquez is obviously and frankly derivative. His dependence on at least three authors is obvious; his dependence on several others is clear but not as explicit. A careful reader, I am sure, would be able to track the footsteps of many other authors in Enriquez's stories. "The Fisherman and His Fish Pearl" is almost a classroom exercise in imitation of Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. Steinbeck prefaces *The Pearl* as follows:

In the town they tell the story of the great pearl — how it was found and how it was lost again. They tell of Kino, the fisherman, and of his wife Juana, and of the baby, Coyotito. And because the story has been told so often, it has taken root in every man's mind. And, as with all retold tales that are in people's hearts, there are only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in-between anywhere. If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it and reads his own life into it.

The similarities in theme and in detail in Enriquez's "Fish Pearl" are obvious. What is even more instructive is the variations that Enriquez has introduced in his imitation of *The Pearl*. Many of them are simply the mark of a writer inferior to his model, but some of them are indicative of the changes that are effected and demanded by the difference in background and culture. The universal has remained constant; its expression has been tempered by the concrete.

Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury* is imitated throughout "The Night I Cry," not only in character but even in the details of setting. Faulkner's Benjie has become Lito, and the fence is now a bamboo fence, but the story remains essentially Faulkner's. There are many echoes of "A Rose For Emily" in "Dance A White Horse To Sleep." Hemingway's influence is visible in many of the stories, and I wonder if Maugham's "Red" has been the inspiration for "Butong." Enriquez has certainly read and been influenced by Arguilla and Rotor. I imagine that with careful reading and a certain amount of detective skill one could find the inspiration for almost all Enriquez's stories in other authors. His stories are the product of his reading, as well as of his historical and geographical environment. A literary scholar (in the tradition of John Livingston Lowe's *The Road To Xanadu*) might trace with a certain amount of profit the influence of Enriquez's reading in his stories and study the transmutation of the material as it emerges in Enriquez.

There is no creative sin in this type of imitation, of course, unless the original story has not been tempered by the author's ingenuity. The Greeks rewrote the same stories over and over, and Shakespeare and others borrowed at will from their sources. Eliot summarized the principle of creative imitation in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

One of the facts that might come to light in this process (of criticism) is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In those aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors . . .; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of the work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously . . . No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relations to the dead poets and artists. (*Selected Essays*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1950, p. 1.)

The problem for Philippine literature in English, as F. Sionil Jose pointed out in an informal discussion at the Ateneo de Manila on 27 July 1978, is that there is no tradition for the Filipino writer in English. Since he has no Philippine tradition, he must go to the tradition of Western literature in English. So Enriquez has gone to Steinbeck and Faulkner.

In evaluating Enriquez's use of the tradition and his literary imitation, literary honesty is demanded. The critic must admit that Enriquez's use of his models is uneven. In some of his stories he has transmuted his material so that it has become his own, but in others, his attempts at imitation have resulted only in copies.

THEME

The stories, however, have been Filipinized to a certain extent. All of them deal, in one way or another, with greater or less skill, with what might be called Filipino values (which I would prefer to call universal values relevant to the Filipino). The Mindanao stories present the conflicts in Filipino culture as it copes with the necessity of change and adaptation. There is the conflict of rural fishermen and city "tourists" in "A Song of the Sea"; of government men and rural farmers in "Pablo-Pedro"; of traditional values and modern concepts in "Honour" and "The Night I Cry" and "Butong"; modernization and tribal primitivism in "The Surveyor," "The Old Bridge," and "Spots on Their Wings."

A large percent of the stories (9 out of 18) deal with what I have called "The Family Under Siege." There is a remarkable portrait of Filipino parental domination in "Son" and "Playing Soldier," the tension of brother and sister in the context of traditional morality in "The Ant Hill," father and son in "Asocena," husband and wife in "Iguana," wife and child in "A Smell of Ilang-Ilang," parents and children in "Pablo-Pedro," "The Night I Cry" and "Dance A White Horse To Sleep." Enriquez's portrait of the

family is remarkable, and although he has suggested no solutions (except indirectly), he has captured the tensions with a considerable amount of skill.

The Silliman stories portray the conflict of city and country, nuanced with the overtones of educated versus less-educated. "Sunburst" is a perceptive and negative portrait of Filipino university life, with echoes of foreign versus Filipino and the activism of youth, which, as it ostensibly rebels against corruption, more meaningfully indicates the conflict of alien and native values.

The Moro stories, among the best in the collection, provide a portrait of conflict as modern civilization begins to encroach upon tribal values. In many ways, the Moro stories stand as a symbol of the basic conflict in Philippine society, which might be summarized as the *status quo* or tradition under-the-threat-of-change. The threat is concretized as the advent of electricity in "Pablo-Pedro," the mortgage in "Honour," war in "Playing Soldier," the city in "Butong," activism in "Sunburst," surveyors in "The Old Bridge," and "Spots On Their Wings," land in "The White Horse," and the PC in "The Wild Boars." The fish pearl, the wild boars, the iguana, ilang-ilang, the white horse and the old bridge are just a few of the symbols that Enriquez uses to underline this basic conflict. The symbols do not always work well (the buses, for example in "Dance A White Horse") but Enriquez's intention is clear.

THE INNOCENT OBSERVER

Enriquez has also adapted the Arguilla technique of the innocent observer to emphasize the basic conflict that he has set out to portray. There is Maria in "The Ant Hill," Chu in "Asocena," the son (Chu again?) in "Iguana," where the innocent observer turns evil, Lito in "The Night I Cry." The innocent observer underlines the presence of evil in the Eden – Paradise that is (or was) tradition. The innocent observer is often contrasted with the elderly, "the last death-vestiges of a forgotten and lost era, isolated and impervious to the pragmatic present" (p. 193).

The use of the innocent observer is almost a commonplace in Philippine literature in English. It occurs in Arguilla, of course, but it is also used by Bulosan, by Carunungan, by Villa and N.V.M. Gonzalez. In a course on Philippine literature in English at the Ateneo de Manila in the first semester of 1978-1979, Dr. Leonard Casper raised the question of the purpose of this technique. Does the use of the innocent observer enable the author (and the reader) to step back from the story and objectify it? Or does the technique rather subjectify the story and make it more personal by allowing the reader to see it through the eyes of the innocent observer? Or is the innocence of the observer intended to underline the evil that is portrayed? Is the juxtaposition of realism and romance in the one story meant to serve as a comment

on the realism? Or the romance? Or are these questions simply a game that critics play, with little relation to the intent of the author?

STYLE

Enriquez's style is good, though it suffers at times from the exuberance of youth. One bus would have sufficed for the symbolic value in "Dance a White Horse," but he has included fifty of them in a manner that stretches credibility and destroys the effect of the image. His English is at times quaint — "glass aperture," (p. 186), the dog "loves to flush those wild palomas along the river bank," (p. 45), *tapa* is referred to as venison, (p. 45), the giant sits "aghast" on a santol branch (p. 179), and coeds wear "scrimp mini-skirts," (p. 235).

Enriquez is often guilty of cliches and stretched metaphors. Fighting is like "a hot cup of black coffee steaming in the half light of dawn" (p. 48), the path is worn smooth by "countless interminable feet" (p. 56), the "words came pouring like torrents" (p. 67), she was "thin and flat-chested like an upturned flat-iron" (p. 88), a roof sags like a "twisted and warped visor across a face" (p. 88), the horse scatters the mourners like "chickens in a hen coop" (p. 195).

Like many a local writer, Enriquez also has trouble making English sound credible when it is used to convey the vernacular speech of his characters. The task is a difficult one. Should you transliterate? Or use the equivalent English to convey the vernacular? Like many a writer before him, Enriquez is inconsistent, since he does not seem to have solved the problem in his own mind.

Finally, like many a writer, Enriquez has fallen into the trap of sex as sensationalism in at least one story ("The Ant Hill") where the details are neither necessary nor helpful to the story. Contemporary writing is often caught in the tension between the Puritan who would reject all realistic sex and opt for the hygienic sex of the stereotyped Maria Clara, and the Libertine Realist who accepts all sexual details because "that's the way it is." The basic literary premise, of course, is that sex, like any other literary image, must be functional and not simply ornamental (or provocative). D.H. Lawrence used it as a valid image for the degeneration of industrial society. Other writers have used it as a symbol for the animal instincts in modern man. It is even acceptable, on its own merits, when it provides a certain shock value in a story. But the shock value of sex is of use only when it shocks us into seeing something other than itself. When it does not lead the reader beyond itself, it has ceased to serve a literary function. The misuse of sex, therefore, is more than a simple lapse in good taste. It is far more than that. It is a distortion of literature; in the terminology of the ancients, a lapse in decorum. It seems to me that in "The Ant Hill," Enriquez is guilty of in-

decorum. It is not a failure in intention. I can see what Enriquez was trying to do in the story, and in intention, at least, the use of sex was legitimate. But he has failed in execution. The sex has not done what he wanted it to do. In fact it has destroyed his story.

Enriquez needs a good editor, for a good editor would have saved him from many of his stylistic mistakes and helped him to clarify his own vision. The editors at the University of Queensland Press have not helped him, for I suspect that their interest in Philippine Writing, at least in the two volumes published thus far (Joaquin's *Tropical Gothic* and Enriquez's *The White Horse Dancing*), has been with the "strange" and the "unusual." The lack of a good editor is not peculiar to Enriquez, of course. Along with the lack of good critics (a fact I have lamented elsewhere and on many occasions), the lack of good editors in English is the most serious obstacle to better Philippine writing in English.

CONCLUSION

A review of Enriquez's latest collection of short stories is productive on several counts, it seems to me. It can be instructive and perhaps provocative. This latest collection of Enriquez has been published abroad. Although that fact in itself may indicate nothing more than the whims of publishers and the reading market, it can also be a measure of the worth of a work, at least in the eyes of those foreign to the culture of the author. The number of Filipinos published abroad is relatively small. Secondly, Enriquez is typical in many ways of the young writer, at least in English, in the Philippines today. He has a vision, but his linguistic and technical skills are not always up to the communication of the vision. It is obvious that Enriquez has power, although he has not always used it expertly. He does have something to say, although the message in many stories is derivative. His language, especially, and his technique need more discipline. The white horse dances, without a doubt, but it needs the discipline of bit and bridle. There is a writer in Enriquez. How well he will age remains to be seen.