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Review Article

Tropical Gothic: Nick Joaquin Revisited

JOSEPH A. GALDON

TROPICAL GOTHIC. Nick Joaquin. St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1972. x, 271 pp.

Nick Joaquin's latest book, *Tropical Gothic*, published some years ago in Australia, marks an end to what future critics will most probably refer to as the Early Joaquin. The volume is the second in a series entitled "Asian and Pacific Writing," whose purpose is to be "a forum for contemporary writers and translators in Asia and the Pacific" and to "make their work available not only throughout the countries of that area, but to a larger readership in Europe, Africa, and America."¹ The inclusion of Joaquin in this series confirms his reputation as a writer of international importance.

Tropical Gothic reprints nine stories of Joaquin from the period 1946-66. Six of the stories are taken from *Prose and Poems*, published in 1952, and three of them, "Candido's Apocalypse," "Doña Jeronima," and "The Order of Melkizedek," are from the *Philippines Free Press* of 1965 and 1966.² The editor summarizes these nine stories as "a brilliant collection about a culture in which East and West, Pagan and Christian, enjoy a turbulent marriage. They present the Philippines from the time of the Spanish conquistadores, to the contemporary political activists. Here is the Filipino as Spanish colonial, as Yankee colonial, as postwar displaced person, as mod swinger, as an Asian with a Gothic soul. The themes are religion, sex, history, and the mystery of time."³ These stories have all been reviewed in *Philippine Studies*, most

1. *Tropical Gothic*, p. vii.

2. Nick Joaquin, *Prose and Poems* (Manila: Graphic House, 1952); "Candido's Apocalypse," *Philippines Free Press*, 11 December 1965, pp. 9-11, 62-64, 70-76, 125-32; "Doña Jeronima," *Philippines Free Press*, 10 December 1966, pp. 9-12, 18-28.

3. *Tropical Gothic*, cover blurb.

perceptively by H. B. Furay, Lourdes Busuego Pablo, and Emmanuel Lacaba.⁴ The bibliographical note in the Introduction to *Tropical Gothic* lists other studies of Joaquin's stories, the best of which are those by Laura Oloroso and Casper.⁵

The present volume therefore represents no significant step forward, either in Nick Joaquin's writing, or in the critics' reaction to it. But the publication of *Tropical Gothic* does provide an opportunity to take another look at the Early Joaquin and speculate on the present direction of his work.

THE STORIES OF THE EARLY JOAQUIN

To characterize the stories of *Tropical Gothic* as the products of the Early Joaquin, like most critical categorizations, is deceptive, for Joaquin was in his thirties when most of the stories were written. But the period 1946-66 marks the publication of his most significant works and his acceptance as a writer of the first rank in the Philippines. The 10-year period includes not only *Prose and Poems* (1952) and the three later stories in the *Free Press* (1965-66), but also *The Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, included in the first edition of *Prose and Poems*, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961), and *La Naval de Manila* (1964).⁶

Lacaba refers to the three *Free Press* stories, "Candido's Apocalypse," "Dofia Jeronima," and "The Order of Melkizedek," as the work of "the later Joaquin, the older Joaquin" with some justification, for there was a gap of some 13 years between the earlier stories of *Prose and Poems* and these latter three.⁷ But Lacaba himself affirms the continuity of theme in the later stories. "Joaquin's themes have come home to fulfillment, not repetition, of his thematic pilgrimage."⁸ Lacaba implies that the main difference between the two groups of stories is the language. "Joaquin has not only developed but

4. H. B. Furay, "The Stories of Nick Joaquin," *Philippine Studies* 1 (September 1953): 144-54; Lourdes Busuego Pablo, "The Spanish Tradition in Nick Joaquin," *Philippine Studies* 3 (June 1955): 187-207; Emmanuel A. F. Lacaba, "Winter After Summer Solstice: The Later Joaquin," *Philippine Studies* 16 (April 1968): 381-90. These and other studies on Joaquin from *Philippine Studies* have been reprinted in Joseph A. Galdon, ed., *Philippine Fiction* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1972).

5. Laura S. Oloroso, "Nick Joaquin and his Brightly Burning Prose Works," *MST English Quarterly*, twentieth anniversary number, 1970 (this number of the *MST English Quarterly* also reprints several other articles on various works of Nick Joaquin); Leonard Casper, *The Wayward Horizon* (Manila: Community Publishers, 1961).

6. Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (Manila: Regal, 1961); and *La Naval de Manila* (Manila: Florentino, 1964).

7. See Lacaba, "Winter," p. 381.

8. Ibid.

also changed radically his language, especially his dialogue."⁹ This may well be true at first glance, especially in the mod language of *Candido*, but I suspect that a deeper analysis of the style would reveal more similarities than differences with the earlier stories. This is certainly true of "Doña Jeronima," which is in the pattern of the earlier legend stories. Once the reader gets beyond the mere words of "Candido's Apocalypse" or "The Order of Melkizedek," the sentence patterns are still what Furay called "lush" and what I have called "baroque," or what the present author calls "Tropical Gothic." In that respect I see no significant difference between the two groups of stories. We are justified, then, in accepting the two groups of stories as representative of the same Early Joaquin, and *Tropical Gothic* as a representative anthology of Joaquin's short fiction of the period.

Having paid my dues as a reviewer to the editor, and to the publishers of *Tropical Gothic*, I would like to take the occasion of its publication to comment on the themes of these early stories, and then look at what I have called the Late Joaquin — the Joaquin who has just recently emerged from the shadows after three years of total silence, and almost 10 years of absence from the field of fiction.

THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Critics have been having a field day of late discovering theological dimension in literature both here and abroad. The prophets of the movement, I suppose, are Nathan Scott and Amos Wilder, and the Chicago school of "Theo and Lit Critics." The movement has spawned disciples in recent years in the Philippines. Although there have been excesses, the suppositions of the approach make a certain amount of sense. Literature as a reflection and/or critic of culture, inevitably reflects the presence or absence of a God dimension in the culture of a people. The "Theo and Lit" approach makes a good deal more sense in the Philippines where the culture has so obviously contained, at least since the sixteenth century, an obvious Christian God dimension, distorted though it may be in individual manifestations. The problem, of course, in this uneasy yoking of "Theo and Lit," is which is the cart and which is the horse? Is the *pasyon* a piece of theological data which happens to be written in a literary form, or is it a piece of literature which contains theological data? The dangers for the unwary navigator are numerous, and not every critic survives the voyage.

Nick Joaquin, up to now, has been studied largely by the literary men and they have delighted in the obvious theological dimensions of his writings. Lumbera called him our "most stimulating lay theologian" in 1968.¹⁰ "Doña

9. Ibid.

10. Bienvenido Lumbera, "Bleak Comedy," *Graphic*, 14 August 1968, p. 60.

Jeronima," "The Legend of the Dying Wanton," and "The Mass of St. Sylvestre" all have obvious theological themes drawn from the Spanish tradition. The remaining six stories in *Tropical Gothic*, if not as obviously theological as the first three, do have a Christian background. But that is the precise problem — what is obviously Christian is not necessarily theological, (or is it the other way around?)

Casper's title to his section on Nick Joaquin in *The Wayward Horizon*, "Lord! Lord! And the Religious Writer," is particularly relevant.¹¹ Casper is obviously playing with the Gospel quote: "Not everyone who cries Lord! Lord! will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Nor is every writer who writes Christian legends and miracle stories, or talks of bishops and mass, necessarily Christian, Nick Joaquin has all the trappings from incense to miters, but is he Christian? Casper is even more explicit when he points out Joaquin's infatuation with the past, which is an "intermingling of Christian and pagan realities." The legends "are not Christian so much as fundamentally pagan is their devotion to superstition Joaquin's stories chiefly derive not from within the Mystical Body . . . but within the shifting lore of folk not fully converted."¹² For Casper and other critics, the mixture of pagan and Christian in Joaquin is disturbing if not disconcerting:

... the past which Joaquin actually counts is not always Christian or cosmic, but pagan and primordial. Constantly there is an urge for physical regeneration, renewal of youth, which rarely seeks sublimation or spiritual consummation. Such works are at least accurate records of contradictions within Philippine culture In his most successful stories Joaquin seems repelled by his own fascination with this brute world and its cults; or seems convinced that to embrace a religious view of this world is to accept the implications of sin as well.¹³

I am not about to deny a theological dimension in the writings of Nick Joaquin. It is definitely there, and its origins are obvious in Joaquin's early piety, his desire to be a priest, and his venture into the Dominican seminary in Hong Kong. There are theological levels in every one of the stories included in *Tropical Gothic*, and in Joaquin's other writings as well. But for the most part, these theological levels are folk levels rather than dogma, and reflective rather than prescriptive. Like any good writer, Joaquin reflects the culture rather than trying to twist it. His stories, therefore, reflect the theology of the culture.

Theology in Philippine culture is largely ambiguous, and a strange mixture of orthodoxy and superstition. The Christian theology is often merely an

11. Leonard Casper, *The Wayward Horizon*, p. 23.

12. Leonard Casper, *New Writing From the Philippines* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), pp. 137-39.

13. Leonard Casper, ed., *Modern Philippine Short Stories* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1962), p. 22.

overlay on a basically pagan base. These elements of magic and superstition play a large role in "Dofia Jeronima," "The Summer Solstice," "The Legend of the Dying Wanton," "The Mass of St. Sylvestre," and "Guardia de Honor." In all of the stories of *Tropical Gothic*, as well as in Joaquin's elaboration of *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, there is this dogmatic "split level" theology, where the dichotomy is not on the ethical level between belief and/or profession and realization and/or action, but between belief which is Christian and belief which is pagan.

Joaquin's preoccupation with the ethical rather than the dogmatic level is further evidenced by his emphasis on choice and free will in almost all these stories. A man must choose for himself, and his choice sets up reverberations that affect him for the rest of his life. This theme of individual free will also unites the novel version of *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* and the nine stories of *Tropical Gothic*. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that it is a basic theme in all of Joaquin's writings. The theme is presented almost as a philosophical thesis in *Guardia de Honor* — freedom, choice, consequence, and the inevitability of what becomes almost a pagan Fate or Necessity. It has its most startling manifestation at the end of *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, when Connie writes:

Please tell Fr. Tony I'm sorry I didn't find the courage to do the right thing, but he knows that for people like me it takes a lot of courage to do anything at all, even wrong, and having found the courage to do this now I may yet find the courage to do the other thing too.¹⁴

To that remark, Fr. Tony (priest and theologian?) says:

If she had done what we say is the right thing, she would have been lost . . .

To save herself she had to do wrong . . . Charity is a terra incognita in which there are no hard and fast rules.¹⁵

Operative also for all the nine stories of *Tropical Gothic* is Casper's summary of this moral dimension of the novel, "the blurred image of right wrestling with wrong."¹⁶ Further, he says:

. . . there is a deliberate withholding of dogmatic denouement appropriate to the author's refusal to make any single character his or his novel's exclusive spokesman. The ultimate wisdom emergent from this very irresolution — after the most assured characters have unfixed their opinions several times — is acceptance of some portion of mystery in divine-human negotiations and an expression of the possibility that human error short of despair is forgivable and that good will moves man closer to salvation not only despite but sometimes through error.¹⁷

It is on this level of morality that Joaquin is most expressively theological.

14. Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing, 1972), pp. 209–10.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

16. Casper, *New Writing from the Philippines*, p. 143.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

The second theological theme of the Early Joaquin which emerges from *Tropical Gothic*, and which is revealed in all of Joaquin's writing to date, is the emphasis on history or time. The main myth which Joaquin uses to describe this pertinence of the past is the Spanish tradition, which has been commented on at length by other critics.¹⁸ It is most obvious in stories like "May Day Eve," "Guardia de Honor," and "The Order of Melkizedek," but it is also present as thematic background in "Doña Jeronima," "The Legend of the Dying Wanton," "The Summer Solstice," and "The Mass of St. Sylvestre."

This "fixation with time and patterns of recurrence" has been described as "nostalgia, repentant that the present cannot measure up to the past."¹⁹ But this infatuation with the past is more than nostalgia. It is, in literary language and metaphor, an affirmation of the perdurance of the individual and the God relation, and an affirmation of the basic theological reality of the Philippine culture — the past, like the present, is "an intermingling of Christian and pagan values."²⁰

"The Order of Melkizedek," the last story of *Tropical Gothic*, and the latest published story of the Early Joaquin (1966), brings together all these theological dimensions. There is the strange mingling of past and present and future, the disconcerting mixture of pagan and Christian, and the underlying theme of freedom and choice. Joaquin's subtitle for the story is omitted in *Tropical Gothic*, but it is more than a glib commentary on the place of Melkizedek in the canon of the Early Joaquin. In the *Free Press*, Joaquin called it: "The Late Late Show Which is the Winter Solstice, Season of Birth and Epiphany."²¹

The nine stories of *Tropical Gothic* are, therefore, a representative anthology of the Early Joaquin, and re-emphasize his precise talent in Philippine writing in English. In Furay's phrase, he has "power and elements of greatness."²² That statement, made after the publication of *Prose and Poems* (1952), is further justified with the publication of *Tropical Gothic* (1972), which includes the three additional *Free Press* stories. Joaquin's power and greatness lie in his themes, in his deeply intellectual analysis of Philippine culture, which has been wedded, as Furay pointed out, to a necessary but effective style.

THE LATE JOAQUIN

After the publication of the *Free Press* Stories in 1965 and 1966, Joaquin

18. Casper and Busuego Pablo among others. See also Arturo Roseburg, *Pathways to Philippine Literature in English* (Quezon City: Alemar-Phoenix, 1966), p. 138.

19. Casper, *New Writing from the Philippines*, pp. 137, 141.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

21. *Philippines Free Press*, 10 December 1966, p. 9.

22. Galdon, ed., *Philippine Fiction*, p. 2.

devoted himself almost entirely to the *Free Press* and to journalistic writing. There was to be no creative writing for almost 10 years. Lacaba points out that this journalistic writing was the other side of the young Joaquin, Joaquin the essayist.²³ This side of the artist was represented not only by his writings under the pseudonym of Quijano de Manila, but also by the publication in 1964 of *La Naval de Manila*. With the advent of the New Society in September of 1972, Joaquin entered the long silence from which he was to emerge only in 1975. Since then he has published two significant essays and three plays. These works represent the beginning of what I have chosen to call the Late Joaquin.

There was a similar period of silence in Joaquin's creative writing between the publication of *Prose and Poems* in 1952 and the *Free Press* stories 13 years later. Lacaba commented of that resumption of creative writing: . . . there has been no *vuelta*, no sharp veering; in the Quijano-Joaquin of the 1960's . . . there has been neither a branching off in two directions nor a turning back. . . . There has only been a continuous development, a pursuit of the same road through similar but individual thematic towns in different vehicles of expression.²⁴

The recent publications of the Late Joaquin, after another period of silence, indicate that once again there has been no turning. Joaquin's preoccupations remain the same — an absorption in time and history, the unique mix of paganism and Christianity, the moral world of sin and choice, and individual freedom.

Joaquin broke his silence with a long and provocative article in *The Manila Review* on "Culture as History" which represents, in a sense, his philosophy of the past which underlies so many of the stories of the Early Joaquin.²⁵ The Aeneas myth of *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* has more than metaphorical meaning for Joaquin. The Father is the son; the present is the past; the Filipino is Spanish and American and Malay.²⁶ Joaquin concludes the perceptive article: "Those who would slight or skip that history are, so to say, trying to edit from Philippine life the adobo and the pan de sal."²⁷ With this article, Joaquin has made the stories of the Early Joaquin much easier to understand.

In December of 1975, Joaquin published *Fathers and Sons: A Melodrama in Three Reels*, which is a dramatization of his earlier story "Three Generations."²⁸ Although Joaquin has chosen to use the same plot, the play em-

23. Lacaba, "Winter," p. 383.

24. Ibid.

25. Nick Joaquin, "Culture as History," *The Manila Review* 1 (April 1975): 5-26.

26. On the Aeneas myth in Nick Joaquin, see Laura S. Oloroso, "The Aeneas Myth as Symbol in Nick Joaquin's *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*," *MST English Quarterly* 15/16(1965-66): 138-51.

27. Joaquin, "Culture as History," p. 26.

28. Nick Joaquin, *Fathers and Sons: A Melodrama in Three Reels*, Goodman 1 (December 1975): 21-40; "Three Generations," in *Prose and Poems*, pp. 3-16.

phasizes freedom and choice much more sharply than did the earlier story. The Aeneas myth is clear, but the theological speeches of Chitong in the last reel are much more obvious than the hints of the earlier story. They make bad drama, but they make Joaquin's intentions in the earlier story much more obvious:

Father, will you hear me? I just want to point out one thing. Father listen to me! Character is not something we inherit. It is something which we create. If we cannot blame our fathers for what we are, neither should we blame ourselves for what they were. Each of us is a new person; and only we are responsible for that new person. Oh yes, there are fathers and grandfathers, and who knows what ancestors crowding within us — but all of them are just ghosts, Father — impotent, powerless ghosts, unless we *allow* them to create us in their image. That was a primitive age that said the sins of the fathers would be visited on their children unto the third and fourth generations. Charity began when God said . . . when God himself said: "No more shall anyone say that because the fathers ate sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge."²⁹

In *Fathers and Sons*, Joaquin the theologian and moralist is speaking out much more clearly than he did 25 years ago.

In 1976 appeared Joaquin's article on the "Beatas: The Intrepid God-Seekers of the 17th Century Manila," and again, a dramatization of the article in *The Manila Review*, entitled *The Beatas*.³⁰ A historian will have to make the final judgement on the article, but in the dramatization, Joaquin adds the following note:

This is history, not history as chronicle, but history as metaphor, the play being shorthand for ideas and emotions that were also a current of events: the mystical movement in the Philippines in the 17th century, the appearance of the beati and the ordeal of the first beaterio in Manila.³¹ Once again in the play we find the Joaquin themes — piety that borders on superstition, the recurrence of history, and freedom and moral choice. Joaquin has updated the article with a not too subtle plea for Women's Lib that tends to obscure the basic theme of equality for the *india*. With his usual penchant for suggestive subtitles, Joaquin has subtitled this play "A Hymn in Three Stanzas."³²

CONCLUSION

The Late Joaquin is barely a year old, and his output is admittedly small,

29. Joaquin, *Fathers and Sons*, pp. 37–38.

30. Nick Joaquin, "Beatas: The Intrepid God-Seekers of 17th Century Manila," *Archipelago*, (25 April 1976): 8–18; *The Beatas*, *The Manila Review* 6, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 1976): 82–122.

31. Joaquin, *The Beatas*, p. 82.

32. *Ibid.*

but perhaps we can detect the beginnings of a new period of creativity. Up to now, there has been no radical change, save in depth and explicitness of perception, from the products of the Early Joaquin. The dramatizations of the late period have all been reworkings of other material. (I have not been able to discover the text of the third play, *Tadtarin*, but from allusions here and there, it seems to be a reworking of Joaquin's earlier story, "The Summer Solstice" from *Prose and Poems* and *Tropical Gothic*.) Joaquin is not a dramatist, at least not yet. All his plays, from *Portrait* to *The Beatas* and *Fathers and Sons*, are rhetorical rather than dramatic. But that is precisely their virtue. It is the weight of their thought that carries them rather than their dramatics. The Late Joaquin is working no new veins, but he is digging deeper into their riches. Perhaps, it is this which will characterize the Late Joaquin — literary elder statesman, existential *filosofo*, rather than tropical gothic.