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Gilda Cordero's Wartime Humor

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as hidden even in His contemporary signs, in His Church and in its work. Perhaps the unbeliever cannot speak of God, but the man of faith can, because he does, and is understood by other believers.

Lastly, God does work through the forces of the history of His people in social change. But he also works in the souls of individuals. Cox was exceptionally hard on theological existentialism and it may be supposed that he was appealing to those who do not meet God on an individual basis. It may also be supposed that he was referring to this when he referred to the "tragedy, depth, judgment and mystery" which did not get altogether fair treatment in his book.³³

ROGER D. HAIGHT, S.J.

*Gilda Cordero's Wartime Humor**

IN the last issue of this Quarterly, we discussed two recent novels which dealt with one of the Heroic Ages of Philippine history: the years of suffering under Japanese occupation. Suffering can often be ennobling, but it is seldom humorous, and it is not ordinarily expected that wartime horrors should be depicted with rollicking fun.

Yet this is precisely what Gilda Cordero has done: she has depicted wartime horror humorously. This she does in a short story entitled "People in the War," which is one of the thirteen stories which she has collected into the little volume with the somewhat infelicitous title of *The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestick Maker*.

If the title is infelicitous, the stories are not. This story in particular is among the most brilliant that Gilda Cordero

³³ *Ibid.*

* *THE BUTCHER, THE BAKER, THE CANDLE-STICK MAKER*. Thirteen stories by Gilda Cordero Fernando. With an Introduction by N. V. M. Gonzalez. Manila. Benipayo Press. 1962. Pp. x, 196.

(or—to give her her married title—Mrs. Marcelo Fernando) has written. In this story everything stands out with clear-cut vividness. Her canvas is crowded with figures, most of them amusing, some of them bizarre.

What could be more bizarre than the instruction left by a dying man to his family to have a statue of the devil erected over his grave? “And there it still stands in the cemetery in Batangas, regal and black, its tail long and sharp as an arrow, its eyeballs and armpits a fiery red, lording it over the weeping angels and the white crosses.”

Or what more bizarre than the man whose two wives (sic) quarreled violently every afternoon, clouting each other with wooden clogs, sending the bundle of clean wash flying out of the window, chasing each other down stairs, clawing at each other's clothes, and rolling down the embankment to the river below?

Some of the incidents are not only bizarre but preposterous: like the custom (allegedly practiced by the same triangular family) of holding gambling sessions once a month under the guise of a wake—with a rented corpse to grace the occasion:

At least once a month they held a wake on the river bank. They rented a corpse, strung up colored lights and gambled till the wee hours of the morning. Sometimes a policeman wandered in—having heard some rumor, and poked around with his night stick. But there would be the corpse, and it was truly dead, there would be the card games but no suspicion of betting (the chips having been scooped away together with the basket of money) and the policeman would saunter away, wiping a tear, leaving the poor relatives to their grief and their gambling.

No wonder the neighbors had to plant a row of trees to screen themselves from these goings-on, “to shield their respectability.”

In this fashion, one preposterous tale after another is told with such poker-faced matter-of-factness that they seem perfectly credible—even though, on second thoughts, they are found to be quite impossible of belief. For instance, an expert wielder of the *balisong* is said to have such an unerring aim

with the knife that "he could hit a coin four feet away, the knife making a clean hole in the center of it." Somehow the tale seems credible in the context, even though (as far as this reviewer can ascertain) it is a rare balisong that can make holes in a metal coin.

There is (as we shall mention presently) an important function played by such preposterous tales. They establish a tone of ironic humor, which is also maintained by other devices. One device is the sudden introduction of a detail (often irrelevant), by which the impression is conveyed that things are not to be taken too seriously. Everything (as it were) is built up and then suddenly cut down to size.

For instance: "My brother's room was the largest in the house, it was the size of the sala and the dining room together because in the good old days it had been a billiard room." In the room is a piano—a Steinway—which someone else had won in a lottery and which, since there was no room for it elsewhere, was lugged into that room. "Mother never objected to the boys lugging things into the house, just as long as they never lugged things out."

And the piano—did anyone ever play it? Oh yes, "Paquito could play 'Stardust' on the Steinway"—which must be one of the more limited uses that a Steinway could be put to.

This tone of ironic humor serves a useful purpose: it allows the story-teller to narrate the most horrible and the most pathetic incidents without sentimentality and without undue emphasis. The story, in fact, is a triumph of understatement.

The grim details of war are introduced gradually and with the utmost casualness. It is not until the fourth paragraph that the reader becomes aware that the story occurs during the war-time occupation of Manila. He learns this fact indirectly, from a description of the shade cast by the fast-growing trees: "The branches sheltered a group of nursery school children" whose playground had been taken over by the Japanese soldiers. With equal casualness and indirection the reader learns that the girl-narrator has been made to study the Japanese language in school: "My father had a

low opinion of the Imperial Army. When I showed him my report card, he thundered, What do you mean 75 in Algebra, 95 in Nippongo!"

In this manner, the tragic story of the war unfolds—but with the focus always on the amusing elements, and with the more painful aspects of war kept in the background. Thus, we are told of a certain rich man, whose goods had been seized by the Japanese and who was hiding for dear life in another man's house: "The only time Mr. Solomon ever went out of his room was when he offered to show my Papa how to make ham."

In such a context, the reader can look with amusement, but also with sympathy, at the queerness of people whose problems are deceptively simple. There is the mother who plays favorites among her children, showering affection on one to the neglect of the others. There is the favorite daughter, courted by two rich rivals (one owns a charcoal-fed Hudson, the other a charcoal-fed Ford), who runs away instead with a penniless lieutenant—"a second lieutenant at that". And there she finally is, deserted by her husband, penniless and with a baby, taking refuge in her uncle's house in Manila.

There is, incidentally, an unnamed hero in this story—and it is only on reflection that one realizes that he must be heroic. It is the narrator's father who hardly comes into the story at all, but whose house is apparently open to all who need shelter. The unobtrusiveness of that fact is quite appropriate: for there were (and are) many such unobtrusive people in the Philippines, whose hospitality is unlimited, whose hearts (like that of Chesterton's Eldred) are as open as their doors.

Some of the character sketches may seem overly sharp if taken out of context. There are the ladies with social pretensions who are forced by war-time penury to take in washing. They try to save their pride by "handling the starched pants drying on the wire hangers with pale finicky fingers," and pretending to understand nothing but Spanish. When at lunch time there are people in the shop, a great sizzling in the

kitchen (created by dropping a wet towel into the hot pan) simulates the sounds of good cooking; the customer is politely invited to stay for lunch, and just as politely withdraws, leaving the family to eat their "meal of rice and *bagoong* smugly sitting on their reputations."

Taken out of context the passage may sound unkind. But this is a benign story; the humor is sharp but not malevolent.

In such a context of ironic humor the grim details of the war can be described with unemotional vividness. The details are sufficiently grim: both those of the Occupation and those of the Battle of Liberation. They are mentioned casually: the hunger; the buy-and-sell; the shoddy entertainment; the "charcoal-fed" cars when gasoline was not to be had; the tricycles when the cars were no longer available; the barricades; the bombings; the burning of houses; the hiding in dugouts; the death of babies; the constant running to avoid capture or the bombs. "Somewhere in the running I had lost my shoes and was proceeding barefoot; I had also forgotten my favorite dress in the last dugout." In a more emotional context such details might sound jarringly irrelevant; here they are the saving irrelevancies that keep the story from getting emotionally out of hand. They implicitly establish a philosophical attitude which seems to say: "The war is over with all its horrors; it was amusing enough while it lasted."

The virtue in all this is the fact that much of the description is done indirectly. There is no explicit accusation leveled against the Japanese for censoring even the school textbooks to expurge any mention of America; we are simply told that the children enjoyed paging through the textbooks, the pages and the pictures of which were often smeared with ink, i. e. censored. There is no explicit mention that the Japanese went about commandeering cars, which in fact they did; we are simply told that their driver had now turned houseboy because the Plymouth had been commandeered.

Those who were not in Manila during the war will appreciate this story better if they read Mr. Victor Gosiengfiao's

article in the last issue of PHILIPPINE STUDIES on "The Japanese Occupation: the Cultural Campaign." That article gives the historical facts: Gilda Cordero's story gives the facts a concrete life.

There are many excellent stories in Mrs. Fernando's first book of stories. "Sunburn" is a prize-winning story about Filipinos in the United States, who sometimes suffer from, and sometimes also are responsible for, certain forms of racial discrimination against them. "The Eye of a Needle" is the story of a little girl in the grip of a terrible fear. "Hunger"—one of the best stories in the book—is also about a little girl who is always hungry: for bodily food as well as for the attention and affection that she does not get from her parents.

But "People in the War," among her stories, is in a class apart. It belongs to the growing body of literature about the Heroic Age of the Philippines.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

*Scripture and Literature**

ONE of the chief characteristics of the Church in the 20th century has been the re-emphasis on the Bible, the word of God. Augustin Léonard has written:

Our age seems to have been given the grace to begin anew to listen with greater attention, to the living and efficacious word of God (Heb. 4:12) The Word of God is the first and fundamental reality upon which the whole Christian mystery depends In view of this, it is all the more noteworthy that Catholic theology has scarcely treated or developed all the variations of the theme.¹

* **THE INSPIRED WORD:** Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature. By Luis Alonso Schokel, S.J., translated by Francis Martin, O.C.S.O. New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. 418 pp.

¹ "Towards a Theology of the Word," in *The Word: Readings in Theology*. Edited at the Canisianum. New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1964, pp. 64-66.