

philippine studies

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

Gonzalez: Look, Stranger, on this Island now

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Philippine Studies vol. 12, no. 1 (1964): 167–170

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

standards of truth and beauty and moral duty, so on the plane of personality we measure ourselves in the presence of infinite love, and in that mirror of another's love we come fully to be ourselves."

The steps of the final argument are not spelled out as clearly as Scholastic philosophers would demand. But then, Fr. D'Arcy warns us that only those who have eyes to see can penetrate into this deeper insight. It is really a matter of obliquely perceiving both finite and Infinite in one glance.

The book's main worth, even more than in its positive message, lies in Fr. D'Arcy's constant comparison of his own observations with the statements, theories, and objections of other philosophers and analysts, and even poets (the insights of Gerard Manley Hopkins play an important role in the final synthesis). These comparisons and contrasts help to situate the Catholic position within the modern context, and they highlight the strength and weaknesses of the arguments for God's existence with reference to the modern patterns of thought that the scholar must face in the universities. And the final solution of the book gains in stature, because it draws from the genius of many minds; it appeals to the reader not so much because it is original, but because it is complete.

EDUARDO P. HONTIVEROS

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND N. V. M. GONZALEZ

LOOK, STRANGER, ON THIS ISLAND NOW. By N. V. M. Gonzalez. Manila: Benipayo Press, 1963. 200 pp.

Look, Stranger, On This Island Now, N.V.M. Gonzalez's latest book, is a collection of ten short stories written over a span of seven years. The title of the volume is the opening line of one of W. H. Auden's poems.

Because the epigraph of the book is taken from Rizal's diary, the publisher's blurb concludes that Rizal is the stranger who is being asked to reflect upon "the changed and changing Philippine society." This may be true. However, the epigraph was actually intended only for "Buenavista," the first part of the book. The first stanza of the same poem from which the title was taken had been chosen as the epigraph for "The Other Shore," the second part of the book, but permission for the reprint did not come in time.

According to the publisher again, the epigraph is an excerpt from an entry Rizal wrote in his diary when he stopped at Romblon. The

fact that Romblon is the locale of the six stories in Part One and the knowledge that N.V.M. Gonzalez was born in Romblon may lead us to conclude that the stranger is N.V.M. Gonzalez himself who, through his stories, revisits his birthplace. However, the title is supposed to embrace both parts of the book and the stories in "The Other shore" are not set in Romblon. Of the four stories in Part Two, three are set in Batangas and the last story in a United States Army base "in the shelter of the Sierra Madre." It would be a mistake then to insist that the stranger of N.V.M. Gonzalez's book is one definite individual. The stranger is the reader himself who is being invited to share in the experiences the writer has articulated in his works.

The stories in the volume are almost perfectly arranged in a chronological sequence. "The Whispering Woman" was written in 1954, "The Bread of Salt" early in 1956, and the other four stories in the first part, "The Wireless Tower," "The Eternal Fort," "Come and Go" and "Sharks, Pampanos, and the Young Girls of the Country" between 1956 and 1957. "The Flight of Gentlemen" was written in 1958, "On the Ferry" in 1959, "Dry Heaven" in 1960 and "The Popcorn Man" in 1961.

N.V.M. Gonzalez had originally intended to publish the six stories in "Buenavista" in a volume that would have been entitled *Buenavista By the Sea*. The single setting and the rather romantic title would have led readers to expect from the book such a glimpse of Philippine rural life as had been afforded by *Seven Hills Away*, N.V.M. Gonzalez's collection of stories about the *kaingin* folk of Mindoro. *Buenavista By the Sea* would have suffered from the comparison.

The stories in "Buenavista" are written in the usual spare style of N.V.M. Gonzalez. Atmosphere is suggested by a few deft strokes. Objects appear in hard and sharp authenticity but description is kept to a minimum. The only exception in Part One, in the whole volume as a matter of fact, is "The Eternal Fort." Language here is relatively more 'lush,' at times reminiscent less of N.V.M. Gonzalez than of Nick Joaquin. It turns out however, and appropriately enough, that the story is the product of a sick boy's imagination, an imagination at once sensitive and intense. But on the whole there is more 'local color' in *Seven Hills Away*; the stories in that collection are more charming, more picturesque but also less complex, less competent.

If we look at the date of the stories again, we will note that the last story in "Buenavista" was written in 1957, the same year when N.V.M. Gonzalez started to work on his novel *The Bamboo Dancers*. *Buenavista By the Sea* could have been published in 1957. It was not. N.V.M. Gonzalez held on to the six stories of "Buenavista" until he had written four more stories. The link may seem rather tenuous at first glance, but there may be some basis for suspecting that N.V.M.

Gonzalez's work on *The Bamboo Dancers* had something to do with his decision to postpone the publication of his stories.

The four stories in "The Other Shore" hardly make the collection any more charming or picturesque. But if we consider the cumulative impact of the ten stories, it becomes apparent that N.V.M. Gonzalez is after all not primarily concerned with sketching pretty vignettes of rural life in the Philippines. It is only incidental that the first six stories are set in Romblon and that none of the stories depict urban life. What is more significant is the pattern that the combined light of the ten stories renders luminous. The stories in *Look, Stranger, On This Island Now* revolve around a basic situation which parallels the situation dramatized in *The Bamboo Dancers*.

The Bamboo Dancers is a story of contemporary Filipinos and the author's articulation of the problems of the Filipinos in the book is an implicit comment on the state of the country and the people. Ernie Rama is the prototype of a generation of Filipinos alienated from their own cultural heritage. The novel traces Rama's long journey into light, his gradual realization that all the time he was trying to run away from himself.

The characters in *Look, Stranger, On This Island Now* stand, like Ernie Rama in the beginning of the novel, in need of illumination. They have to follow the same road Rama had traversed. The characters can choose to take the leap from ignorance to knowledge, illusion to reality, self-deception to truth. The action of the stories turns on the revelation of character. In the end the protagonist recognizes himself for what he is or, if the protagonist is not revealed to himself, he is at least revealed to the reader.

In a letter to Father Bernad regarding *The Bamboo Dancers*, N.V.M. Gonzalez explains his method of treating values:

the dimensions as regards what might be called moral problems and the social values as well—are bodied forth also . . . Here, the method is, simply to set up reference points; for each moral or social value under treatment there is a counterpart by which a reader might, using a system of triangulation of his own, discover the relative distance of the characters from any particular moral idea, of one character to another, and of the author to the novel's subject itself. [*Philippine Studies*, VIII (July, 1960), p. 626.]

In *Look, Stranger, On This Island Now*, N.V.M. Gonzalez follows the same method and he chooses as his point of reference the story "The Wireless Tower." The protagonist in "The Wireless Tower" is a fifteen-year-old boy. Roberto Cruz does not achieve anything spectacularly heroic. All he does is climb up an abandoned wireless tower to find out whether or not the rumour that the rod at the top of the tower was split by lightning is true. The climb is not easy. Halfway up the tower he suffers cramps but, rising above pain and fear, he reaches the top. And his reward is the sight of the split rod. When he gets down he writes one sentence in his notebook: "It is true." The boy discovers

the truth for himself and in some subtle way the discovery of the truth causes a change in him. Objects he sees on his way up the tower present themselves in an altogether different guise when he sees them again on his way down. Black, forbidding shapes later appear glowing with brass trimmings. Massive rocklike clouds turn into soft, felt carpets. Pebbles begin to glitter like precious stones. The boy learns the truth about the rod at the top of the tower; he also learns something about himself. In his conquest of the tower there is joy and there is triumph, but there is also humility. The boy feels no desire to hold up his head proudly or to throw out his chest because of what he has achieved. He recognizes his success but also acknowledges his limitations. He remembers that for a while he was afraid.

Roberto Cruz is an exception. The rest of the characters are less willing or less able to face the truth and themselves. The father in "On the Ferry" who finds himself caught in the net of lies he weaves to conceal his failure; a priest in "Dry Heaven" who, without his knowing why, feels that he is losing touch with the realities of his vocation; these are the typical characters in the book. Of their kind is Mr. Malto in "The Whispering Woman," the middle-aged schoolteacher who alternates between self-deception ("... he stood for a more righteous kind of nationalism. The politicians, so far, had not quite organized the party he might join." p. 29) and a rueful acceptance of his condition ("He really had no cares in this world, nor perhaps in the next." p. 34).

There is Felipe (alias Philip) Bautista in "Come and Go," who wavers between pity for his sister's tough luck in landing an asthmatic husband and a vague feeling of annoyance at being crowded out of her life by her preoccupation with children and husband and home. But he realizes that Perls after all had only made her choice, the same way he had made his many years ago when he cut himself off from the family in order to try his fortune abroad.

In "Sharks, Pampanos, and the Young Girls of the Country," a man returns to visit his old haunts and is made aware of how much he has changed since he left his town and how the boy in whom he sees so much of his former self will also change. Life seems to move along placidly enough for the Felix family in "The Flight of the Gentlefolk" although the war has forced them to move to the province. But a young boy returns to the city for a visit and in the disorder of the abandoned home, sees for the first time evidence of the dislocation that the war has caused. Nothing is in its proper place. He finds himself no better than a stranger in the house where he grew up, and in some instinctive way, he penetrates into the war-time insecurity, the fear and the tension that serve as the backdrop for what at first appears a pleasant bucolic tale.

If we reverse the order in which "The Bread of Salt" and "The Whispering Woman" appear, the stories will be seen to follow a strict

chronological sequence. But N.V.M. Gonzalez chose to begin the book not with "The Whispering Woman" but with "The Bread of Salt." Perhaps the departure from the chronological order is designed to call attention to the contrast between the first and the last story in the collection, between popcorn and *pan de sal*.

His Grandfather had spent the last thirty years of his life as an overseer in a coconut plantation. But the boy in "The Bread of Salt" feels that better things are in store for him. He is only fourteen but his skill on the violin has already earned him a spot in a professional band. He sees how fitting it is that he should no longer buy the *pan de sal* for the family's breakfast table. Indeed, he feels he should not be asked to run errands anymore. He hopes to woo and win the niece of his Grandfather's employer. At night he dreams of success, wealth, fame. But at an *asalto* for the girl's aunts, the boy becomes aware that he is out of his depths and he is able to reconcile himself to his condition. On the way home after the party, the boy stops at the bakery to buy *pan de sal*.

Associate Professor Leynes in "The Popcorn Man" is as empty, as unsubstantial as the popcorn he feeds on. He is dissatisfied with the progress of education in the American military base where he is teaching. But more than once, he gives himself a pat on the back for staying in spite of the indifference of his superiors, the insipidity of his colleagues and the impertinence of his students. One major consolation is that in the camp, popcorn and coffee come free. It is clear that Leynes has cause for discontent. But he is willing to compromise. What may have been righteous indignation dissolves into an embarrassing self-pity. And in the end, he begins to wall himself in with illusions he may yet come to believe.

We can see from the evidence of *The Bamboo Dancers* and the short stories in *Look, Stranger, On This Island Now* that one main motif dominates N.V.M. Gonzalez's fiction of the last seven or eight years: the illusion-reality motif. It seems safe to say that self-knowledge is one value N.V.M. Gonzalez dearly cherishes and that one problem he sees in contemporary society is the inability and sometimes the refusal of so many people to come to terms with reality.

EDILBERTO DE JESUS, JR.

THE PROBLEM OF PHILOSOPHY

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? By Dietrich von Hildebrand. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1960. viii, 242 pp.