

philippine studies

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

Gathering Grief: The Lonely Room of Isabelo T. Crisostomo

L.M. Grow

Philippine Studies vol. 45, no. 2 (1997): 281–286

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

Gathering Grief: *The Lonely Room* of Isabelo T. Crisostomo

L.M. Grow



The Lonely Room and Selected Stories. By Isabelo T. Crisostomo. Manila: Horizons Books, 1964.

A writer can be associated with a tradition to such a degree that individuality of voice is obscured and the nuances of texts overlooked. For instance, a creative writer presumed to draw heavily on personal experience may be written off as a mere chronicler, a situation that has beset Isabelo T. Crisostomo. Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg (1987, 62) assert that "His experiences have been vividly registered in his stories, told in simple and lucid language." This reaction is not uncharitable; in fact, it is really an echo of the remarks made by Alejandro R. Roces in the "Introduction" to *The Lonely Room and Selected Stories* (hereafter referred to as LR): "He writes nostalgic stories about . . . the unsung country folk who live and give birth and die in Tikiw . . . they are written simply and with sincerity" (ix). It is possible that the impression many readers have of Roces—a featherweight author whose one subject is gamecocking¹—has contributed to the scant critical notice that Crisostomo has been paid, especially since it is well-known that Roces "discovered" Crisostomo.²

Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg go on to cite Francisco Arcellana: "In the art of the short story there is a great tradition. It is the tradition of the tale, the legend, the parable—the story told for its own sake, in the language of the greatest accessibility and the utmost simplicity." They then conclude that "Crisostomo belongs to the tradition." Leonard Casper (1969, 61) has more specifically identified this tradition as "folk." He carefully notes that "Folk elements can provide a rich dimension to modern writing when they are assimilated with dignity and care (as they are in Arguilla and Gonzales) or are stylized to a kind of perfection (as they are in Joaquin's latter-day legends or in 'May Day Eve') or mythically transfigured (as they are in the same author's 'The Summer Solstice')" (61). But unfortunately, as Casper (1969, 62) correctly points out, "Many of the [Crisostomo] stories are exhausted by brief paraphrase because potentials of character complication have been utterly disregarded and because incident rarely allows any real insight into people. The author is intent, instead, on trivial sentimental ironies,

violent melodrama, superstition, and pathetic heroism; folk elements recurrent in popular vernacular magazines, as well as in the oral 'floating literature' around them" (62).

Casper considers Crisostomo's most successful stories to be those underwritten, and on this basis selects "Discovery" (as "The Spider" was retitled in LR), "A Kind of Loneliness," and "A Gathering Grief." These are certainly LR's best stories, but perhaps not because of the underwriting, at least by itself, especially if we at least hold in abeyance the conclusion that "the appearance of underwriting . . . proved to be, eventually, only a symptom of neglect" (Casper 1969, 62). Casper is disappointed because "Reliance on formula leads to patterns of predictability which, in turn, implies (in the absence of contrary evidence) a passivity and insensitivity in his characters which makes it difficult to know or care about their fate" (63). Buhain, however, puts a more favorable construction on these developments: "The stories in this volume are of Man helplessly caught in the whirl of his inscrutable nature. They are most of them stories of gloom, of frustration, of disillusionment, told with love and sincerity and restraint" (xiii). Admittedly, immediately thereafter Buhain makes very puzzling claims—"They tell of . . . the triumph of the primitive over civilization" and "They faithfully portray the vigor and charm of rustic life, the misery beyond the often superficial gaiety of the grassroots." The first claim is unsupportable and the second self-contradictory. But his suggestion about humanity simply being swept along by an inexplicable human nature is worth exploring, especially in "A Kind of Loneliness" and "A Gathering Grief."

The Rite of Passage

"A Kind of Loneliness" is transparently centered around a rite-of-passage motif. Pito, the protagonist, learns, however bitterly and reluctantly, that the finality of life is death, as unfair and unfathomable as the death may be. The obvious juxtapositions and foreshadowings reinforce death's ineluctability; the ironies reinforce its incomprehensible nature. The personification of the bird links it with its owner: "Come, Martin, he said. I will give you something to eat" (LR 2). The narrator subtly calls attention to "Martin" as a proper name by generic reference elsewhere: "He took the martin out" (LR 5). Just as the hawk sinks its claws into the martin (LR 5), so the martin sinks its beak into Pito's palm (LR 2). Though this results only in a slight bruise, when Pito goes to the playground the next day, in search of grasshoppers to feed the martin, he runs against the barbed wire enclosing the playground (LR 3). Pito's mother washes his wound with kerosene (LR 3), and later, he cleans the martin's wound in the same way (LR 5). Between these two mishaps, Pito sees a hawk pounce on a chick and carry it away, but does not see that in his pursuit of the grasshoppers he is playing the same role that the hawk is when it swoops first on the chick and later on

the martin. Pito is also oblivious to the "answer" to his own question "Why did it [the hawk] have to pick on his helpless little friend?" (LR 7), which is contained in his next act (ironically related in the sentence subsequent to the question): "He crushed a small black ant that had lost its way in the cage."

Death is as irrational as it is omnipresent, as the occasional ironies make clear. For instance, the martin is attacked on a postcard-perfect day: "Outside, the sun had gone down, painting the sky with salmon and blue as soft as velvet. The rain was not coming" (LR5-6). Even though, as Edong, who has given Pito the bird, has warned "Rain was not good for the martin" (LR 5), death comes from this same rainless sky in the form of claws that are anything but soft as velvet. Yet more ominously, the death of the martin is, as the title says, only a kind of loneliness. Adult life, as Pito will to his sorrow discover as he spreads his own wings and departs childhood, bring with it a myriad of others.

A Gathering of Grief

"A Gathering Grief" puts the same motif of inexplicable, inevitable death into a wider context: a barrio fiesta. The story's multiple ironies are obvious to the point of being heavy-handed, but this situation simply highlights what Casper (63) deduces as the reader's reaction to Crisostomo's characters: "a passivity and insensitivity . . . which makes it difficult to know or care about their fate." In fact the story is a Decameronesque type of dark comedy, a cynical and disgusted rendering of both human nature and the human condition: "In the heat of the village orgy little accidents—a man stabbing another for an unpaid bet, or for an innocent remark, or for threatening to elope with one's daughter, or for saying something salacious about the illicit relations of one's wife with a man other than her husband—created but little stir" (LR 19). A stabbing is obviously neither little nor an accident and is the more shocking when precipitated by a harmless comment and reacted to very minimally by others. And even those inclined to question this state of affairs are quickly diverted by their physical appetites, as evidenced by this sequence from *Moises*: "'Look at this fiesta, Hildo, all of you. Is this not evil?' He surveyed the faces about him. 'Ah,' he exclaimed 'here comes the salabat. This is good for cold stomachs.'" (LR 17).

The human condition is presented as a product of human weakness, especially the tendency to succumb to the beckonings of the senses:

But it was not all gambling and fun in Tikiw during this vespera; the air was heavy with the inviting aroma of garlic and bagoong being sauteed in frying pans in the rich oil of slaughtered swines that had been fattened for the occasion, the fragrant, delicious smell of cakes of a hundred kinds. This was true particularly in the house of old man Mariano Kapuli, the *teniente del barrio* who never tired of preaching

the virtues of thrift and frugality (whenever he was not occupied in the cockpit), where there was a great feast, for one of his daughters had just been married to one of his farm tenants with whom she eloped three days ago, and several of the village-folk, invited or not, attended the celebration, gorging themselves with rich food and basi mellowed for years in earthen jars. (LR 15-16).

If the feast described in the first half of this paragraph is what "not all gambling and fun" consists of, then we have a carnival indeed. And if the leader of the barrio is hypocritical enough to preach virtue yet frequent the cockpit and sponsor a huge marriage celebration for a daughter who has eloped, what can we expect from the others except that they will gorge themselves, whether they have been invited to do so or not? Juxtapositions like "Tikiw was in its best summery mood. There had been a death in the lake that morning" (LR 11) only enhance the reader's sense of the incongruity of all this.

Although there is a hint of a propitiation rite about Doroteo's death—"the lake, swollen for the season, exacted its toll" (LR 11)—there is no suggestion of divine retribution about the tragedy, even though "Each year the lake claims at least one life in the village, and no one can explain why" (LR 11), unless "the river lashed like a giant belt across the eastern part of "Tikiw" (LR 11) indicates a beating administered as punishment. If so, perhaps "the old village chapel . . . still milled with a handful of old women" (LR 12) likewise has an ominous cast (the mills of the gods grinding exceedingly fine) about it. It is tempting to dismiss these references as mere accidents created by slightly unidiomatic verb use, but elsewhere we find the same technique: "The dirge emitting like a ribbon of silk from the funeral car" (LR 20-21). The apparent mixed simile adds to the tapestry of ironic incongruities in the story. A ribbon unspools rather than being emitted, "emitting" suggesting a mechanical or electronically-controlled release incompatible with the human feeling proper to a dirge. Finally, "ribbon of silk" is too smooth and generally positive in connotation to go with "dirge." Again, "They walked past the gambling stalls that hemmed both sides of the road, near the village chapel" (LR 18). "Hemmed in"—in other words, enclosed, even trapped by—is what we might expect, but "hemmed" by itself suggests "bordered" or "finished," ironically implying that the gambling stalls belong, thus creating a quite subtle irony. The death, in fact, serves principally to underscore the utter callousness and indifference of the celebrants. But there are recurrent references to the neglect of the spiritual side of life beginning in the second paragraph: "the womenfolk . . . left to resume their house-cleaning with a passion that was almost religious" (LR 11). Not only does this again suggest too much emphasis on physicality, "almost" suggests that even in here there is a shortfall. Other references are more explicit: e.g., "the old village chapel, long denied the luxury of repair and

adornment, and the love of human hands, still milled with a handful of old women" (LR 12). "Luxury," needless to say, is heavily ironic, and the women are milling about, not praying. Similarly ironic is the proximity of the chapel to the gambling stalls (LR 18), especially in light of the celebrants' behavior: "The procession stopped in front of the chapel. The people in the cockpit across the street shouted and cursed as a pair of fierce fighting roosters tried to mangle each other to death in mid-air, in the milling grada" (LR 21). It is probably not coincidental that both the chapel and the grada are "milling."

Rather than being drawn to matters of the spirit, the people in this story are inveigled into sensual pursuits. Again ironically, it is "Somewhere near the chapel" that a huckster with a loudspeaker presses people into viewing "a live mermaid, a beautiful sirena, half-fish and half-women, naked, found in the deep waters off the coast of Borneo. And the village-folk flocked at the stage like a school of fish swarming toward an enticing bait" (LR 15). Though the sirena is a fake, her allure is not thereby diminished, any more that the delusion of a mermaid prevents sailors from being lost on the rocks a mermaid lures them to. Was this the fate of Doroteo the fisherman, whose "body was recovered from the dark, murky waters of the lake among its teeming fishes" (LR 12)? In any case, "teeming," redolent of life, is an obviously sardonic irony, juxtaposed as it is with the corpse of the death fisherman.

Yet it is not the lake that symbolises death—it is heat, flame, sun—the agents of desiccation. The story's opening—"It was a hot day. . . . There had been a death in the lake that morning, just as the sun was going up on the river"—sets the stage, and the last paragraph brings down the final curtain: "And as the funeral procession neared the lake, Renato, squinting his eyes as he looked at the water shimmering in the harsh, intense sun, suddenly felt glad, for in his heart he knew that in a few months the lake would be drained of its water and its fishes, and become once again an expanse of arid, lifeless wasteland" (LR 21). As Renato walks home with his mother past the gambling stalls, "Saddled in his mind was the thought of the dead man, and what Moises had said of the lake and the fiesta, and now . . . the truth burst upon him like a burning sun" (LR 18). It is "In the heat of the village orgy" that "little accidents—a man stabbing another for an unpaid bet" (LR 19) occur. Near the story's end, "The little [funeral] cortege moved slowly on . . . in the scalding sunlight" (LR 20). In mid-story we are told that "The candle standing proudly at the center of the table was consuming itself with its own hot, shivering flame" (LR 16) and "The lonely candle on the table continued to burn itself out" (LR 17). The personification created by "proudly," "shivering," and "lonely" clearly enough links the candle's fate to human fate, particularly when, in the story's penultimate paragraph, we are told that "a question burned like a candle in his mind" (LR 21).

If Renato's question is why people behave the way they do, the story provides no answer, as the ambiguity of the title, "A Gathering Grief," might have warned us at the outset. Does grief do the gathering? Does "gather-

ing" simply mean "accumulating" or "building up"? It is fitting that we cannot be certain, for this story, like "A Kind of Loneliness," depicts death as a given and human nature as a puzzle. We cannot really comprehend the carnal, callous, uncaring people in the procession, the revelers who, driven by appetite, neglect their spiritual selves in favor of gambling, cursing and stabbing one another for innocent remarks, or even, for that matter, why martins must perish in the claws of hawks. We can only realize, at whatever cost in grief and loneliness that, whether by *pulikat* in the water or by withering in the sun, we will be consumed like the candles we are, in a shimmering, lifeless wasteland.

Notes

1. An assumption that I consider unwarranted (see Grow 1992).
2. Roces, while Crisostomo was still a student at the Far Eastern University, made "The Spider" available for publication in the *Arizona Quarterly* (Crisostomo 1957, 124).

References

- Buhain, Jose M. 1964. Preface. In *The lonely room and selected stories*, by Isabelo T. Crisostomo. Manila: Horizons Books.
- Casper, Leonard. 1969. Folk elements in the fiction of Crisostomo and Quirino. *Solidarity* 4.5: 61-66.
- Crisostomo, Isabelo T. 1964. *The lonely room and selected stories*. Manila: Horizons Books.
- . 1957. The spider. *Arizona Quarterly* 13:124-32.
- Grow, L.M. 1962. The durian humour of Alejandro R. Roces. *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 20.4:258-76.
- Roces, Alejandro R. 1964. Introduction. In *The lonely room and selected stories*, by Isabelo T. Crisostomo. Manila: Horizons Books.
- Valeros, Florentino B. and Estrelita Valeros-Gruenberg. 1987. *Filipino writers in English: A biographical and bibliographical directory*. Quezon City: New Day.