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The Crafted Fact: Cornelio S. Reyes' "Yesterday's Tomorrow"

L.M. Grow



Over forty years ago, Delfin Fresnosa (1949) sounded an *ubi sunt* note of lament over the apparent dispersal of one of the important literary movements of the prewar Philippines: "Where are the Viray, the Cornelio S. Reyes, the Ocampo of the gregarious, militant days of the Veronicans?" Viray, a brilliant poet and critic, has, with his recent literary renaissance in particular, answered with such productions as *Morning song*.¹ Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg (1987, 164) have answered for the now-deceased Ocampo: "He left artistic and literary legacies the Filipinos can pride themselves in." But Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg have only two paragraphs devoted to Reyes, even though he is widely respected by knowledgeable readers. Two of his stories, "Problem of Living" and "White as Heaven," were selected to Fresnosa's "Roll of Honor" for 1948, and the latter was one of just four stories singled out by Viray (1949) for detailed commentary.² Nor is it simply as a spearhead in an ambitious literary movement³ that Reyes has made his mark.⁴

It is "Yesterday's Tomorrow," however, that we might want to linger over as an example of Reyes' literary art.⁵ A first reading might glean nothing more than an impression that this is yet another sentimental, even saccharine, formula story about lovers parted by parental arrangement and the practical need to secure the material supports of life. But it is not the theme which makes this story; no more marked contrast, in fact, could be found than to the merits of Consorcio Borje's powerfully rendered thematic unfoldings in "To Be a Man" and "The Beetle." It is deft use of artistic device which weaves the rich tapestry of this compact fictional masterpiece.

At the outset we realize that the first-person narrator is stunned. The wavering coherence of his utterance is reflected in the short, choppy paragraphs, the primer diction, and the Dick-and-Jane syntax:

Tomorrow was what she said. Tomorrow I am coming to you.

What I said I cannot remember. Perhaps I was silent. Perhaps I did not say a thing at all. Perhaps I only echoed her words. Perhaps I only said Tomorrow you are coming to me.

But one thing I know. I do not want her to come (p. 284).

Another symptom of the narrator's disordered mind is his repetitions; e.g., "But they told me that you are bad" (p. 285); "The moonlight is raining upon her" (p. 286); "I am going to tell her you are bad and then I am going to leave her. She is beautiful with the paleness of the moonlight raining upon her" (p. 286). Sometimes these dribble off into fragments which echo only in part the full sense—minimal to begin with—of a statement: "That is the sound of a leaf falling upon the grass. Leaves falling upon the grass. And those rustling sounds in the high grass is [sic] not made by any human being seeking a path. It is some strange animal of the night looking for its way. Some strange animal. Leaves upon the grass" (pp. 285–86). This parallelism is not an ordering device but a mere parroting without advancement in thought:

I am looking down deep into the pond at the bit of night sky that makes up its bosom. I am looking way down at the round pale moon caught among the black branches and black leaves of a tree hanging by its roots at the opposite side. I am looking way down at the stars twinkling below its mysterious and fathomless depth. All around me are many songs different songs. The song of the crickets screeching and whirring in all the night calling to their mates. The song of night birds. The song of the wind whispering secrets to the leaves of trees. And the song of strange flowers of the night. (pp. 284–85)

And the narrator's self-contradictions are more evidence for this conclusion; e.g.,

... I am going to leave her.

And her body will be upon the grass and her face will be upon her hand on the grass and her whole form will be a quivering mass of regret all in tears. (p. 285)

Tomorrow I shall tell her I love you so much you must come away with me. I am going now. She is not coming. (p. 285)

The narrator's confusion is also highlighted by the drifting back and forth between interior monologue and exterior dialogue:

Dear, do not let us talk of things I do not understand. Kiss me on the lips.

But no I must leave.

What. . . .

Nothing dear.

I am going to tell her now. And then I am going to leave her. I must leave her now. (p. 287)

A similar juxtaposition comes at the end, when the narrative stance suddenly shifts from the traumatized narrator to the composed, if melancholy, lady:

You cannot love this man you are going to marry.

What does that matter? He is the chosen of my parents. For years he has been serving us. And he is good. He is very good and kind. Besides there is our little farm and father is getting very old and very weak. And there is my old mother and my little sisters and brothers. I love them all and all of them must live. And there are many other things. You see I cannot leave. Tomorrow is my wedding day.

But then how can you have come to me?

You told me you love me and asked me to come. (p. 287)

Surely the most subtle artistic device at work to convey the unmoored mind of the narrator is synaesthesia, breaking down as it does the normal discreteness of perceptions of the respective senses:

Songs which are perfumes that haunt. But the most beautiful song of all is the song of the moon singing gently in the pale yellow light upon the grass and upon the trees and upon the still water of the pond. (p. 285)

The moonlight is raining upon her. It is drenching her body, her hair and her white flowing gown. It is soaking her with its shining paleness. (p. 286)

What helps to prevent the story from descending to the level of mere pathos is the cosmic sweep of the narrator's lucubrations, however disjointed: "That is a universe below the pond. Those stars winking mischievously in the dark depths are worlds. Are there happiness and sadness too in those worlds? Are there tomorrows too? Are there men and women? Are women's bodies also soft and yielding and warm under men's touch?" (p. 284). Complementing the

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