

THERE were three judges. Jack Yemen Bryan of the American Embassy had very little praise for it.

But cried Loecin with his usual literary flamboyance: It is a cry of ecstasy, a shriek of pain, a sigh of peace.

It is written with great brilliance, done with masterly craftsmanship, said Villa.

And he of the intense piercing eyes, full expressive mouth, he who was voted six years later the most outstanding young man in Philippine literature—Nick Joaquin—won the first prize in the *Free Press* Short Story Contest for 1949.

The story was *Guardia de Honor*.

Never perhaps was a short story more deserving of a prize, never perhaps will another be. Joaquin has written a masterpiece that can hardly be equalled, and as the perusal of his volume *Prose and Poems* proves, not even by the author himself perhaps.

It was said of Thomas Wolfe that his was a fierce energy that could not be beaten into form—but it can be said of Joaquin that he has both the fierceness and the form.

Reading and rereading the story, one gets the unmistakable impression that he is in the presence of a structure that has in the words of Loecin "the very fury of creation—attended by perfect control." The architectural unity of the different parts, all the more remarkable because they are divergent, reminds one of a Gothic monument built in matchless symmetry. The unique fusion of the past, the present and the future through the mirror device captures, as it were, the timeless dimensions of eternity and focuses to a sharper perspective the puny aspirations and the apparently insignificant despairs of men. The two plots or the two generations, though years apart, meet through a thin thread of illusion (is life not one?) each independent yet complementing one another running like themes in a sonata point-counterpoint yet meeting at the end in a splendid burst of harmony. The past is fused with the present (Natalia meeting Josie), the present is fused with the future (Josie seeing through the mirror the forecast of what is to come) and the past in the end "closes the ring and completes the circle." (Natalia married to Andong)

Artificial, unrealistic, so would cry many a critic. But is art not a synthesis of life's shifting kaleidoscope, a scheme of the ideal transcending the real?

Perhaps, were it not for the theme of the story which plays on man's primal emotions and dark instinctive drives, one might well be tempted to think of a prim well-kept classical garden to



D. M. MAGLALANG

which naturally a wild forest park would be preferred. But it is the content that gives the story a kind of fierceness and rugged power and, hence, a shade of elemental grandeur.

Be all these as they may, the author is however more interested, as far as this study is concerned, in Joaquin's handling of a difficult theme—the eternal problem of evil and human responsibility.

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NICK JOAQUIN'S "G"

There is a very striking passage in the story, which I believe strikes the keynote of the narrative. The mother says to her erring daughter: I would prefer you to sin, being free, than not to sin because I had tied your hands.

Hers might just as well have been the voice of God speaking through the ages who though knowing that human freedom could be abused nevertheless kept it free and always the object of divine respect.

"God made man from the beginning and left him in the hand of his own counsel," so Ecclesiastes writes. "Before man is life and death, whatever he shall please shall be given him."

In this respect Joaquin's attempt at reconciling evil and human freedom with divine Providence is in perfect consonance with reason—and revelation.

For implicitly Providence is in no way inconsistent with the evils born of human freedom. Aquinas, with whom I believe Joaquin is well acquainted, gives a parallel exposition of the same problem in his *Contra Gentiles, de Creaturis*. He writes:

"An element of perfection is more worthy of being preserved by Providence than an element of imperfection; but freedom of the will is a perfection and acting through necessity is an im-

perfection. Therefore, Providence is more concerned to preserve the liberty of the will than to establish necessity over all active efficient causes. Further, if free will were taken away many good things would be withdrawn. The praise of human virtue is nullified when good is not done freely; and justice would be a mockery."

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Angelic Doctor the following words are put by him into the mouth of the mother as she continues talking to her erring daughter:

"What makes the life of a Christian so hard is that he must choose at every step, he must choose, choose, choose, at every moment; for good and evil have such confusing faces—evil may look good, good may look evil—until the most sincere Christian may be deceived, unless he chooses. But that is one of his greatest glories too—that he chooses and he knows he can choose. I placed those emeralds in your hands knowing the crucial temptations that afflict you, because I wanted you to be free to choose and thus show how deeply I still trust you."

Because he sounded the profound depths of Catholic principles in his creative writing, it is no wonder that Joaquin is described by some critics as the most Catholic of Filipino writers, one whose faith is the underlying moving principle of his art.

It must be kept in mind here, however, that I do not mean that Joaquin intended in any way to deliver a sermon in writing the *Guardia de Honor*, nor did he intend to array his artistic powers in defense of a definite set of values. That would be prostitution. He

merely incorporated into his art the timeless facts of human emotions intimately related to the conduct of life, facts which are definitely of higher rank than those which are not.

Literature must not necessarily be didactic; it should be merely ethical. For if it does not move our sympathy with the deepest things of life or if it does not make us cognizant of the eternal truths, then it is not great literature.

Joaquin stands squarely before life, before the fact of good and evil, time and eternity, freedom and fate, and his artistic vision undimmed by the confusion around him is keenly aware of the unchanging truths underlying them.

Jack Bryan wrote that the "treatment of *Guardia de Honor* borders upon a merely commonplace awe at the mysterious workings of fate." Did he actually understand the story? What is fate?

A determining principle by which things are to come to be as they are or events to come to happen as they do, so it is defined. It is in short a principle of necessity inherent in the nature of things to which men are subject.

Joaquin's *Guardia de Honor*.

To illustrate.

Natalia of the first generation foresees through the mirror that Esteban the man she does not love would die in the carriage accident. Frantically she goes down to meet Mario the man she really loves to tell him that she would ride with him instead. But they quarrel and Natalia blinded by unreasonable anger stumps out of the room and rides instead with Esteban. The carriage races through the cobbled streets. Mario in another carriage follows in hot pursuit. Natalia's carriage is flung against the wall and Esteban is killed.

With fire and spirit Natalia had struggled against what she thought was to happen. But her final decision to ride with Esteban was precipitated by a quarrel she could have prevented, had she been more patient and by an anger she could have controlled, had she tried enough.

Josie of the second generation foresees the future too. Then at the threshold of the crisis forecast by the mirror she cries out with empty bravado: I can! I will! Face to face with the

turns his face to the past and at the same time points an accusing finger at the moral decadence of the present.

Natalia stands for the old order; Josie stands for the new. In the former's strength and passion is typified the strength and the passion of the past, the very things that make life what it should be, says Joaquin: a brilliant panorama of men living and dying like gods.

In Josie is the fatalism of the present, a defeatist attitude in the face of suffering, there is no turning back now and no use struggling, she cries, the pressure is terrific. When was life a question of one's wanting and not wanting? Life is just one pressure after another. Whatever one does one was always bound to do, like it or not!

Luxury, comfort, security have made this age a spineless age, Joaquin seems to say.

Again the past, in the person of Natalia, saw below the surface the deeper realities of life. The giving of the emerald earrings "was more than a lending; it was an entrusting." They were a symbol, an emblem, a trophy of battle, a fact Josie refused to face. I accept only their market value. I will squeeze you and wring you out of them and everything else they mean, she says to Natalia. Nothing must be left except their price tag.

It is quite evident that Joaquin intended Josie to stand as an indictment of today's materialism, the kind that destroys every thing in its wake, transforming past glories into mere dreams, he says somewhere in his play, presaging the return of the jungle—the modern jungle, the slum jungle — demolishing man's moments of history and devouring his monuments.

Indeed Joaquin's sense of the past brings the past alive again to remind us of what we have lost and what we must therefore retrieve.

A romanticist, he bids us go back to the age of the lamplight and the gaslight, of harps and whiskers and carriages, the age of manners and melodrama, of Religion and Revolution, when men were valiant warriors who could be scarred but not conquered, and from whom the fates could win nothing save earrings.

The present generation is flying further and further from what it should possess, but perhaps there is still hope somewhere. Is the "unhurrying chase" not relentless?

With this hope lipped by Andong, Joaquin ends the story of *Guardia de Honor* and with its restatement, I also end this study:

"God is a cunning hunter!" ‡

Guardia de Honor — A STUDY

Is there at all a vindication of such an idea in *Guardia de Honor*? Is there really in the story a blind awe at the mysterious workings of fate in the lives of men like the awe perhaps a man of the street feels as he beholds the interplay of lightning and thunder awesome because unintelligible, fearful because uncontrollable?

A closer analysis would prove that the author does not believe in fate at all. Much less does he dramatize its inexorability, as Loesin wants us to think Joaquin does. If indeed Joaquin believes in inexorable fate and at the same time stands on the principle of human freedom, he obviously involves himself in a contradiction. If he talks of fate, it is not because he thinks there is one but because we think there is one. What is to happen, no doubt will, as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, happen. In much the same way as a dot cannot be erased from the scroll of the past, can a dot be erased from the scroll of the future? But this does not in any way imply that foreknowledge is a determining element in human action. For if things happen or will happen, it is not because they have to happen but because we make them happen.

And this is the underlying thought of

crisis, she sinks down and whimpers: Oh, it's no use—no use at all! It just happens! It is happening right now!

Hers is a surrender—utter surrender and at a moment when a struggle is most needed. And it brings on the catastrophe.

The first generation was destroyed by excess of passion; the second, by a lack of it.

Obviously fate does not fit into the picture at all, as Joaquin really intend-

by

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ed it should not. If there is such a thing as fate, it is not in the stars, Joaquin seems to imply, nor in any inherent principle of necessity. It is in each one of us.

Incidentally, the foregoing analysis brings us to another point in our study of *Guardia de Honor*: Joaquin's perennial obsession with the past.

In this story as in all his other stories and, too, in his only drama: *The Portrait*, he persistently and resolutely