PREFACE

EVIL AND THE CHILD

INO BECAME A student in my CW 202: Poetics class sometime during the pandemic.

This class is the creative writing equivalent of a directed readings or special problems course as it exists in the literature and language programs of the Department of English and Comparative Literature, albeit it is not an elective but rather a core subject. This is because, as instated and rationalized in the creative writing curriculum, the poetics course is designed to formally prepare and assist the students of this program in the writing of their theses.

Like Ino, all the other students in this class sought to answer, for themselves, the basic but arduous questions of why they wrote, what they wrote about, how they wrote, what specific questions or "difficulties," thematic and formal, confronted them most often or most pressingly when they wrote, and what the other creative and writerly projects were that they looked forward to carrying out in the proximal or perhaps distal futures.

Ino had a clear idea of the collection of short stories, written at various points before and during his residency in the creative writing program, that he wished to comprise the body of his thesis. In responding to the requirements of this class, he fleshed out the critical introduction that developed his idea of the tradition to which he believed his

Likhaan Special English inside pages 110624.indd 6 11/14/2024 12:24:36 PM

stories belonged—to which they sought to make some form of modest contribution—identifying its history and various textual features. It is an eminent and welcome distinction of this special issue of the *Likhaan* journal that such an extended critical intervention, penned by a creative writer, and framed from the complexity of their creative practice, is being featured alongside a significant sampling of their literary production.

The crucial issue that Ino easily recognized to be central to his practice is the theme of initiation, whose history and fictional "exemplars" he identifies and discusses, mostly as they may be evidenced in our own anglophone tradition. And his primary argument about this theme has something to do with the concept and reality of evil, which he believes the child protagonists in this kind of story all must encounter and, in their own unceremonious and painfully silent ways, process, understand, and accept.

Ino, in his scholarly reflection, brings up a variety of psychoanalytic and sociological theories about the nature and context of "growing up," but most crucially, he cites the theory of the monomyth, the archetypal "hero's quest," as famously identified and explained by the comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell. The argument that the psychological journey of the child figure in most initiation stories can be seen as passing through the complicated stages of separation, transformation, and return is easy enough to appreciate and accept.

But his clarification, his own take, on this narrative pattern lies in his suggestion that it is the reality of evil that presents to the child the precise moment of existential and moral crisis through which their consciousness suffers a sea change, vitally and irrevocably transforming them.

During the oral defense of Ino's thesis, an important definitional question that was raised—by me, in particular—was the following: Just what exactly constitutes "evil" as our anglophone literature's touchstone stories—as well as Ino's pieces—about childhood and initiation or "growing up" understand it? I brought this question up because, as against what was mostly implied by the sophisticated theories that Ino's survey and readings had invoked, to my mind, these important fictional texts do not remotely sense evil as a profoundly metaphysical or religious notion.

Instead, as I see it, the intuition being presented in these stories refers to something closer to an "awakening," an aliveness, to the brute and everyday reality of suffering, particularly when it is gratuitous or undeserved, and how "social" it tends to be—which is to say, it is a consequence of inequality in the local worlds that their characters must dwell in.

Likhaan Special English inside pages 110624.indd 7 11/14/2024 12:24:37 PM

What we see in these various and compelling texts, including the ones that Ino himself had written, is, in a manner of speaking, not so much a fall from (the illusion of) original grace (a loftily theological and therefore deviously misleading interpretation) as the simple and inexorable dawning of an ethical sense: *how suffering can be real, how it can be felt as true and life-changing, even if it isn't exactly happening to oneself but rather to others.*

Indeed, this is an insight clearly being presented by and in Ino's amazing and memorable stories, which are mostly about suffering "others"—let's call them "abjects," for this is how psychoanalysis and its politicized (mostly feminist) deployments have named them—with whom the child protagonist, often in trepidation and with a dawning sense of unqualified horror, ends up relating and identifying.

The moment of identification, of unforeseen and sometimes unwilled/undesired "fellow-feeling," is in many ways the initiation itself. On the other hand, in maybe a couple of Ino's own stories, the abjects are the children themselves, who suffer right from the get-go.

All told, in Ino's works, to be a child in our country, particularly if one's family is poor (which is to say, working to lower class), is to be abjected: Powerful societal and material forces, even or especially in the form of domestic and familial bonds, are structurally and (going by the destitute and gossip-ridden settings in many of these pieces) physically or literally arrayed against one's own simple happiness, well-being, and peace.

And so, in these stories, we encounter in various fictional guises the selfsame figure of the abject (who is sometimes a child, sometimes not quite).

To wit:

Luis the slightly obsessive-compulsive loner, who is weird because he lives in his own nymph-haunted mind, infused with its own peculiar if tacky soundtrack.

The superstitious Yaya Taba (from my favorite story here), who is veritably bedeviled by her tropically gothic, horrific, and provincial past.

Vilma, the homely working-class mother (in my second favorite piece), who is unfortunate in many ways, including being afflicted with a killjoy and lice-infested daughter. (This story has, sadly, not been included here, as it has recently appeared in a regular issue of the *Likhaan* journal).

The nerdy dog-loving possibly sexually abused and roundly bullied queer "Bumbay" boy, who is viciously monickered Bangkay (hands down the most miserable and woebegone child in this anthology).

Likhaan Special English inside pages 110624.indd 8

11/14/2024 12:24:37 PM

Jessa, the calamansi-fruit-hating, China-rose-loving, bourgeois-aspiring, and covetous poor housemaid's daughter.

Lovely, the transgender Bisaya neighbor, who is brutally murdered by a policeman (who gets away with it because nobody cares, except for the sissy boy protagonist, who is the lone and beleaguered witness).

Billy, the queer product-taster whose love for a journo tenement-neighbor proves, alas, unrequited.

And finally, the pseudonymous grandmother Juana, whose lifelong truth (and love) is denied her by the prosaic and xenophobic society she has been forced to inhabit (my third favorite story in this wonderful collection).

These abjects are not always the central character—meaning, they don't always receive the story's epiphany, being the narrative occasions for the protagonist to get spurred/grow out of the unbridled self-interest of the childhood "id" (living in the realm of the imaginary, shored up by phantasms of wholeness) into the frenzied and fractured reality of the "ego," who is nothing if not our social being's helplessly relational self.

We can thus paraphrase the journey from childhood to adulthood—the "growing up" or transformation that initiation stories arguably seek to describe—as the progressive movement away from the relative safety of self-absorption into the larger and necessarily messier frames of sociality and community.

This is a process that we can also call crossidentification or, even better, empathy.

Emerging from the solipsistic references of childhood, the adult self increasingly proves to be an intersection of identifications with legions of others, with whom it must exist responsibly.

With whom the self—with whom we—must ethically share this world.

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Likhaan Special English inside pages 110624.indd 9

11/14/2024 12:24:37 PM