

About “The Service Station” – a metaphor of the consumer society.

By Michael Francis Gibson

Michael Francis Gibson wrote the scholarly introduction to Miguel Errazu’s book, The Riddle of the Seal, the first volume of Errazu’s three-volume narrative, Chronicles of the Greater Dream, which was released by the University of Levana Press in September 2007. Here is Gibson’s commentary on certain aspects of the book, which may intrigue students of the work of Ernst Bloch. More information about the book may be found on www.greaterdream.com.

In the last chapter of the *as yet unpublished* third volume of *Chronicles of the Greater Dream*, the author himself turns up in the story and accompanies his protagonist on a state visit to the Province of Cornea, until recently governed by a tyrannical Grand Duke. He records a conversation he had with the Prime Minister of the new government during a state dinner.

“We dined that evening with the young Grand Duke. The Prime Minister, as we learned, is an outstanding historian, and while his scholarly work had never been appreciated by the Grand Duke, his real troubles only began after he published a short story entitled *The Service Station*.

As summarized for our benefit by the author, the story relates the misadventures of a young man called Omee, who sets out to visit his girl friend in a neighboring town. He stops off at a service station on the freeway, but when he wants to leave again, he is told that the road has momentarily been closed, and that he will have to wait.

The wait goes on and on. Night comes, day returns, a week passes, then a month; more and more people keep turning into the service station and are unable to leave, and the service station itself, in which all these stranded people bed down like campers, keeps growing until it reaches the monstrous proportions of the Grand Duke’s palace.

Since these people can’t go anywhere, they must find ways of paying their keep. They are hired by the service station manager to clean up, serve food, watch and spy on one another, and even arrest, judge and incarcerate one another. They must also be fed, of course, and since the service station bar serves only junk food, that’s all they get. The men soon begin to crave company, and the accommodating manager brings in a busload of prostitutes, and even shows X-rated films once a week in his office.

The same bus occasionally drives the people to a neighboring fun fair, where they all have a virtual good time, and as days pass, they find their lives turning increasingly upon the contents of the sandwiches they will be served for lunch, the girls with whom they will be able to spend a few minutes in the evening or the roller-coaster ride they plan to take on Friday afternoon.”

“And how does it end?” I asked.

The Prime Minister made a rueful face.

“The end is simple, Mr. Errazu,” he said. “One day, the road is opened again, but none of them know where to go.”

This short narrative, occurring near the end of the story, appears to sum up the intent of the book and the *Chronicles* may be read as a metaphor devised to remind readers of the place they wanted to reach when they set out on their journey.

The *Chronicles* offer “a full account of recent events in Gondwana” – a country enigmatically described as “the famed *Tertium Hemisphaerium* of Antiquity” – and this strange country, only now recovering from a disastrous post-colonial period, may be viewed as an embodiment of the badly damaged sphere of the imagination - a region that cannot be clearly localized although, some philosophers hold, it “localizes” us.

Miguel Errazu tells the story of a young man who is first discovered in a state of amnesia, in a secret prison in the middle of a nameless desert. A child leads him out of the compound and several men speed him away and fly him to this mysterious land, telling him that his grandfather had been its last king a hundred years ago. The book relates their perilous journey through the land, pursued by hostile forces, including a terrorist guerrilla entity known as *Ultima Ratio*.

A number of singular natural phenomena are also encountered in Gondwana, foremost among them, the golden Emblemata or Living Statues. Unfortunately, I'm quite unable to give a coherent account of them in the short space of a review. Suffice to say that traditional assumptions that hold them to be angels, demons, ghosts or extra-terrestrials are quite unfounded. The Emblemata are natural phenomena but, like many other features of the material world, they have not yet been understood. In its account of the Emblemata, then, the *Chronicles* develop a fascinating metaphor of the processes of culture and artistic creation.

This brings me to the point I wanted to make here. Thirty-two years ago, in 1975, I had a long talk with Ernst Bloch which resulted, that same year, in two one-hour radio broadcasts for Radio Canada and, some years later, in a series of eleven one-hour broadcasts over the French cultural radio, France-Culture. (The interview was later published by Arno Münster in *Tagträume vom Aufrechten Gang*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977).

I should add that my interest in Bloch's work, as Karola Bloch remarked to me some time after her husband's death, has always been his *Blochism* rather than his Marxism. My concern, at the time of our meeting, and ever since, has been to develop a plausible account of the enduring human need for "meaning". Where does this need arise, and how can one respond to it today?

Such a question appears particularly significant in an age in which traditional views have largely ceased to be operational. In this perspective, Bloch's approach to culture has proved most valuable to me and, I imagine, to others, too.

My encounter with Bloch and the ensuing work gave me a certain familiarity with the elements of his philosophy, which allows me to make an intriguing observation today. Some readers of Miguel Errazu's book cannot fail to notice that the various cultures and philosophies of Gondwana (that the *Chronicles* describe in considerable detail) bear a striking resemblance to a number of familiar aspects of Bloch's philosophy. Among these are such notions or operators as homeland (*Heimat*), Not Yet (*Noch Nicht*), the Possible (*die Kategorie Möglichkeit*), daydreams (*Tagträume*), and Transcendence within Immanence (*Transzendenz in der Immanenz*).

The philosophies of Gondwana view individual identity, the universe, human culture, religion and the arts as continuing and interlocking processes. This is intriguing of course, since it suggests that there are societies, in other parts of the world, that aren't locked into the restrictive world-view so characteristic of our own world. This should make Errazu's book particularly interesting to students of Bloch's utopian philosophy.

And now, since the truth must be told, it remains for me to admit that Miguel Errazu is also a fiction. I myself wrote the book and Miguel may be seen as my alter ego. Why did I adopt this strategy? For a number of reasons that will become apparent to those who reach the end of the book – the most important being perhaps that the book was commissioned by new government of Gondwana, which solicited "the renowned travel writer" Miguel Errazu a few years ago, asking him to set down the full history of the decisive events that had just unfolded in the land.

I'm tempted to think that Ernst Bloch himself would have been intrigued by this development.