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A Priest to the World, by Mella

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of resistance to and liberation from all overt or covert forms of European colonialism" (p. 90).

In his article on "Black Theology," James Cone, of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, emphasizes the need for a reformulation of the methodology and content of theology. He believes that the first act in doing theology is *praxis*. "Praxis—a reflective political action that includes cultural identity—comes before theology in any formal sense" (p. 99). Many in the Third World will find reassurance in his assertion that "Our cultural identity and political commitment are worth more than a thousand textbooks of theology. That is why we do not talk about theology as the first order of business in EATWOT. Rather our first concern is with the quality of commitment that each of us has made and will make for those about whom and with whom we claim to do theology" (p. 99).

The whole emphasis on praxis, on commitment, on being involved in the transformation of the lot of the poor and marginalized are important reminders for one doing theology within an Asian setting. The process used in Geneva is worth learning from and imitating. There is much going on in Asia that can contribute to story-telling, to sharing of personal accounts about struggles and efforts for liberation from injustices. To this can be added a deeper and more thorough social analysis—something that is perhaps not being done sufficiently in Asia. These two will lead to the final process of theological reformation, where priority is given to commitment to changing the unjust structures in society, and where the Christian people and the agents of social change are seen as the doers of theology.

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A PRIEST TO THE WORLD AND OTHER PROSE WORKS. By Cesar T. Mella. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1984. 77 pages.

Almost every young fiction writer begins with a thinly veiled semi-autobiographical account of his own quest for literary fame. First works are often a collection of literary reminiscences, allusions and laments on the difficulties of self expression, the lack of recognition. Cesar Mella's collection is no exception. "At that time I didn't like to work, for the devil of the literary itch was on my back, although no writer in our country, not even a national artist like Nick Joaquin, can make a living, much more support a family, from writing alone. It was an impractical and foolish decision, but I knew I had to write to keep my sanity and salvage myself from the wreckage of my dreams" (p. 10). "Wound," the second story in this collection, is the chronicle of a

young writer's literary journey. It uses the framework of a Good Friday odyssey through Manila and the memoirs of a half dozen encounters, redolent with literary allusions and the romantic images of the frustrated writer. "Now when I ache to write and cannot write, I feel depressed, restless, tormented—and angry. I get mad at the world and at myself. I also gulp down lots of coffee and burn lots of Kent (sic), and when I have grown dizzy from too much coffee and too many cigarettes and still the words do not flow, I usually leave my room and walk out of the miserable boarding house to a world of sun or rain—it did (sic) not matter which, and I would walk (sic) on and on and on, or ride a jeepney bound for Sta. Cruz or Quiapo" (p. 16). The short sketches are also full of the dreams of the young. "At that time I was also the newly appointed literary editor of our campus publication and my first book of poems was the toast of the . . . studentry. I walked the university like a god immortal and had the crazy notion that all the girls in the school were in love with me" (p. 18).

The eight prose works in Mella's collection are sprinkled with literary allusions—Conrad Aiken, Keats, Eliot, Southey, Camus, Saul Bellow, Thoreau, Kazantzakis, Whitman, Dylan Thomas, Shelley, Tagore, James Dickey and Santos, Brillantes, Joaquin, Daroy, Hufana and N.V.M. Gonzalez among the Filipino writers. ". . . to be a poet one must be either a pirate, a murderer, a gypsy or a traveler-at-large. We chose to travel, to collect as many impressions as possible along the way, impressions that would probably become the creative anchor of our craft" (p. 35).

Mella, at least in this collection, is a melancholy romantic, much obsessed with "old, unhappy, far off things," "warm beers," and "metaphor of a lonely chair and the sadness of a writer in the government bureaucracy" (p. 19). There are girls in every sketch, dozens of them in all—the "shapely niece of a dogmatic Dean," a girl in Baguio, "a sexy teacher from Pampanga," Nelias and Graces and Celas, a Maria and an Angela. But the pursuit is only sexual. There are no marriages and no happy meetings, because the hero, "lonely and wounded," finds no depth either in himself or in his encounters, only shallow self pity and adolescent posing. His escape is almost always to all night sessions of philosophy over "beer and a dish of peanuts" with equally shallow male companions who, in the past, dreamed with him of being writers; or to self-pitying revelations to the girl of the moment who cannot understand the ghosts in his past. Almost always the hero is a writer, and the sketches read like pages of a young writer's diary—sprinkled with literary quotes and the names of authors he has been reading. But the hero is too involved in the contemplation of his own misery and the language with which he expresses it to be anything more than a melancholy teenager. The book is full of the "sadness of a writer" (p. 9). Perhaps this is Mella or perhaps it is the *persona* he has chosen to assume.

Mella has a fine feel for Philippine sensibility and captures it well in his short sketches. His themes are always Filipino romantic. "A Priest To The

World" is a beautifully moving sketch of Philippine poverty and religious feeling. "Kayo na lang ang magpari sa anak ko. Kayo lang makakatulong sa amin" (p. 13). Unfortunately it is spoiled by the miracle of tongues at the grave. "Wound" is a little *Pasyon*, a frustrated writer's Good Friday Journey through Manila which ends on Holy Saturday morning. "(I was) suddenly aware that the crucifixion of Christ was over and it was time for mourning and drinking at Yanks Cafe" (p. 28). "Dappled Summers" is a memory of four summers and three girls. "Usually in summer, lost memories are found again like a childhood castle, or a love note scrawled on the seashore. One goes back, we don't know why, to past memories, hoping that a lost heart, a lost girl, a lost splendor, a lost dream might come back and mingle with the flowing present of one's grief or joy" (p. 30). "April Me With Branches" and "Horns of the Moon" are little more than variations of "Wound." "Dust" brings back echoes of a rural pastoral spoiled by the inevitable presence of death. It is doubly tragic because the death is of the young. "Or Glory In A Flower" captures the essential tensions of rebellion in a Filipino family. "A Twig On The Path" rewrites the myth of the elusive Filipina. "Who is Angela? She is brown and beautiful and things easily become tremulous with fire and fever in the blood when she is near" (p. 70). "In Manila she was the beer I could not do without; she was James Dickey I could not sleep without; she was the rains and the roses and the rivers I kept in the inner caverns of my wellspring, hoping to hoard them all for all time" (pp. 71-72). But her last name is Dolor and she cannot be captured. "Goodbye" she said, "Be Happy." In all his stories, Mella is the perpetual melancholy romantic.

Mella's language is Philippine baroque—florid, poetic, romantic. "The fireflies were as beautiful as the girl beside me, holding my hand, burning a perpetual candle in my heart" (p. 21). "She held my hand lightly, tenderly, and in her eyes was a softness that was softer than a poet's rain falling all over the town" (p. 12). "I knew the days ahead would be fine, full of promise as a boy's daybreak" (p. 15). ". . . and then alone, under a lamp post, in the presence of a garbage can, above me the bruised orange of a flaming sky, I threw out all the loneliness of a man looking, searching for a fragment of himself in the gutters and eyeless doors of the city, the ripples of gold-bright sunflowers, the raped voices of ricebirds" (p. 29). The borders between poetry and prose, between romance and realism are blurred and confused in the author's mind and in his writing. The result is a halfway house between dream and reality.

Mella's language is equally blurred on the technical side. There are lapses in idiom ("I burned lots of Kent," p. 16, "the lumpen community," p. 10, "hillbillies" in Cainta, p. 10, "a woman in sheath," p. 41) innumerable Filipinisms ("It was a Holy Saturday yet," p. 25, "I was only fooling him," p. 27), occasional lapses in tenses, and a strange use of the pontifical "we" in "Dappled Summers." The volume is unfortunately marred by many misprints. Like many Philippine writers, Mella needs a good editor to mine the ore which is here.

Literary critics may have to invent a new genre to include the type of Philippine writing that is represented here in this collection of Mella's works. For the eight sketches in this thin volume are difficult to categorize in traditional forms. Not quite short stories and not really essays, not poetry and yet poetic, they are more properly what a Filipino would call *kuwento* (from the Spanish *cuento*). They are all short, anecdotal narratives, often poetic in tone, romantic, and in many places clearly autobiographical. Every sketch causes Mella to "remember" some past event. "Past memories are my strength" (p. 42). The author solves the problem of classification by calling these selections "prose works." They are reflective, and though not terribly profound, they are very Filipino.

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