

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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## **Beyond Futility: The Filipino as Critic**

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 32, no. 4 (1984) 501–505

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Book Reviews

BEYOND FUTILITY: THE FILIPINO AS CRITIC. By Isagani R. Cruz.  
Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1984. 96 pages.

It is to be sure a brave little book on the Filipino as critic by a respected critic, Isagani Cruz. Brave because it is one of the first books, if not the first, to comment on this particular field, a criticism on critics, a brave enough gesture since it is almost impossible to write on the subject without decrying the obvious dearth of this particular tribe in the country (the active, regularly criticizing and publishing critic), without making some kind of an indictment of this specific field of Philippine Literature, inevitably leading the writer to tread on tricky grounds, touching virtual "untouchables," stepping on colleagues' toes, and possibly his own, being himself a part of a close circuit of critics.

But it is a precious little (in the sense of *slim*) book which makes some authoritative, now and then provocative pronouncements on the local literary criticism scene. Some arguments may no longer hold water (even at the time of writing) but since Cruz himself may have renounced them by now (as implied in his Preface), product of a heady, idealistic angry young man out to change if not the world, at least his own obscurant little country, one is readily inclined to give the book the benefit of the doubt.

But some rather moot statements sound decidedly final and are therefore open to further clarification, not necessarily repudiation. He says for example that Philippine Literary Criticism is futile unless "bibliographic conditions are met in the study of Philippine Literature." For unless the textual critic manages to establish the text, the literary critic may not only be barking at the wrong tree but may be barking at a tree that is not there at all.

He adds that Philippine Literary Criticism is doubly futile if myopic and intractable critics do not try to strain their critical vision beyond the realm of modernism, and on towards postmodernism.

Cruz makes the differences among the different schools sound so simple, saying, in effect, that the New Criticism school does not go beyond the text; that the Neo-Aristotelian (Chicago Critics) is more holistic and genre-con-

scious; that the Marxist believes in nothing but a proletarian interpretation of text (sociological, political, ideological), thus necessarily going outside the text; that the critic of consciousness (Freudian shades?) takes stock of the whole corpus of the writers' previous works before making any literary statement at all; that the hermeneutic critic latches on to the author's intention, first and last; and that the structuralist zeroes in on the reader's response, the affective reaction.

In the chapter entitled, "The Spare-Time Scholar: *Literaturwissenschaft* in the Philippines," his strongest chapter, he declares that in the three areas of Literary Criticism, Literary History, and Literary Theory, the Filipino scholar is alive and well. But in the next breath, he concludes that he, the Filipino literary scholar, is everywhere and yet nowhere, since he has stopped evolving ever since his fixation with the modernist school. And unless he comes up with literary theories that *are* postmodernistic in spirit, Filipino in tradition and orientation, then Philippine Literary Criticism is, well, not only futile, but doubly futile.

In a chapter on the teaching of Philippine Literature, he believes that the subject should be taught in a way that is not New-Criticism-oriented, footnote-smothered, masterpiece-obsessed; not as politics, sociology (although the writer may not separate his sociological or political conscience from his literary conscience, how can he), nor as a study of specific literary systems and schools which Philippine Literature certainly is hardly made up of, but as a study rich in itself and "one that can stand up to the best in the world" (p. 39).

The book ends with a chapter called "Unflattering Close-ups: Random Notes towards a History of Philippine Criticism." He begins by commenting on the leanness of output where Philippine Literary Criticism is concerned, not enough to justify a history. He goes on to make some "random notes" on some few critics deserving his attention. He comes up with appraisals which are not really all that unflattering, nor all that flattering either. He puts in a good word or two for critics and researcher-scholars like Fernandez, Ileto, Manlapaz, Bonifacio, Galdon, Foronda; is impressed by an issue of *International Popular Culture* which is devoted to Philippine Popular Culture by Maceda et al, particularly commending the articles written by Bien Lumbera and Alice Guillermo. He is not too keen on a book on aesthetics by Pasricha and Hernandez; considers Demetillo too New-Criticism-oriented; quarrels spiritedly with Abad's Neo-Aristotelian dogmatism (although, obviously, he is most impressed by Abad's achievements in the field of poetry criticism); lauds Casuga's literary theorizing which hurray, goes beyond the New Criticism school; dismisses San Juan as a critic who is difficult to read because of convoluted syntax and self-contradictory assertions; rejects Mallari's aesthetics as weak since it does not have any specific persuasion; lightly dismisses Medina as critic since his language is difficult to understand

("he does not know how to write" p. 56), otherwise his thesis could have been workable, which is that the romantic agony of the Filipino writer is, in the final analysis, something that echoes the ultimate agony of the country, and that the Tagalog poetic impulse is basically informed by the Tagalog passion for freedom.

It is, after all, just the beginning of a more extensive study of the subject; and, too, how may one expect a voluminous book on a field that the critic Cruz himself has hinted is rather random, directionless, and lean. And this is very true, since, as Cruz comments, the literary scholar in this country is just a sparetime scholar. Who expects after all, to earn a living from criticizing, and making literary reviews? The whole set-up makes it almost impossible. The brave little (in the sense of number) circle called the Manila Critics Circle is at the moment, in fact, scrounging around for funds to further its noble intentions along this field.

And regarding textual criticism in the country, Cruz mentions this much fussed over sallied-solid controversy with respect to a line from Shakespeare's Hamlet which goes:

O that this too too sallied (solid?) flesh could melt  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!

Bowers concluded beyond doubt (?) that the word is really *sallied* (sullied . . . the word *sully* coming from the French *souiller*). A certain Kokeritz commented on the other hand, on the "philological improbability" of this in a devastating article.

The point is, problems like this one may never really be resolved. How then does the literary critic in this country cope? Should he just sit in a corner and twiddle his thumbs all the while waiting for this "tremendous spade-work" (p. 12) along the lines of biblio-textual research? Or is Cruz really making a mountain out of a molehill out of a problem where the local literary critic is concerned? As a matter of fact, the problems of textual criticism as applied to classical literature are really different in nature and gravity from those applied to modern literature. And in the meantime, in the absence of a reliable biblio-textual research on a literary object, couldn't the literary critic himself, take on the task of textual criticism, working along a certain criterion (as suggested by a certain Bentley) which is that, the best reading is the one that makes the best sense, one that can be reasonably attributed to the author?

The weakness of the book (which is understandable and expected, considering that the chapters were really separate papers and lectures given at one time or another when the lecturer is sometimes limited to about fifteen minutes) lies in the oversimplifications; particularly the one regarding the differences between modernist and postmodernist schools since there are times when one school really spills over into the other. Much more so where the

local critic is concerned. The Filipino writer and critic, for that matter, is averse to being pegged down to a rigid mold and most of the time, playing it by ear, or by instinct (not, hopefully, on account of ignorance,) uses an approach which is most in consonance with the nature of the literary work under study. Thus, the elitist formalist is so only if he is dissecting a poem of Torres or Angeles, or even Bautista, but is quite ready to go Marxist if necessary and inevitable. There really isn't much quarrel between the Chicago critics and the New Critic School, since both agree on the essentials of criticism, in the sense that both use a basically intrinsic approach.

The Filipino critic is therefore, by his very nature, everywhere and nowhere, which could be an advantage, like a writer (in the service of negative capability) identifying himself with everyone and no one.

But the biggest oversimplification (and almost unforgivable) is the statement, "until modernism is dislodged from its favored place in Philippine intellectual life, our literary criticism must remain not only futile but doubly futile" (p. 24).

For certainly, the postmodernist approach to literary criticism is not the only valid approach, although a good critic must be ready to sympathize with its intentions, no matter how rigid a modernist he is. But then, consider:

1. Postmodernism's new sensibility refuses to take art seriously.
2. One of its manifestations, the so-called apocalyptic strain, has even sounded the *death knell* for literary criticism.
3. The significance of its revolutionary claims has really been overrated.
4. Postmodernism is not necessarily a breaking with modern assumptions but rather a logical culmination of the premises of these earlier movements. (Which simply means that the good local critic, following the drift towards this logical culmination, is bound to get there, whether he likes it or not.)

Admittedly, postmodernism as a literary and critical movement has immense possibilities and the good critic is therefore ready to apply it when and wherever called for. For instance, if the piece of fiction is hewn along postmodernistic lines (like a Barthelme and his sense of "atemporality," and on our local scene, a Cesar Aquino piece), it is downright foolhardy to harp on Joycean "epiphanies or key moments." Incidentally, modernism's hold is not so much on the minds of our best critics as on those of our best writers.

Cruz I'm sure would agree with me in the belief that the local critic must be granted the right of free choice as to methods. It is not the wrong choice of method, in the final analysis, but a critic's want of sensibility, scholarship, and taste, which could be the culprit. Who was it, after all, who said, "We can always forgive a critic for poor theorizing whose erudition is extensive and whose taste is right."?

And these are the very qualities Cruz readily concedes to the literary

scholars which the country abounds in, he admits.

In effect, then, *Beyond Futility*, the precious little book, has given us precious much by way of an optimistic view, regarding this field of study. Still and all, local literary critics can thrive only in the rich soil and climate of a truly flourishing local literature. There can be no vigorous Philippine Literary Criticism where there is no vigorous Philippine literature.

Finally, whatever the literary theory, Filipino-oriented or not, the best critic is one who utilizes a critical apparatus that has the greater scope and flexibility.

We of course await Cruz's promised next volume, the braver, bigger book, hopefully this time entitled, *Beyond Cavil*, The Filipino as Critic. It is only Cruz with his perceptiveness, his stamina and genuine sympathy for the arts in the country, who could come up with the criticism of local criticism, to which *Beyond Futility* may be said to be just an eye-opener or some kind of prolegomena.

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THE RAVENS: A SELECTION OF PHILIPPINE WRITING. Edited by Andres Cristobal Cruz. Manila: Philippine Education Co., Inc., 1980. xx, 211 pages.

*The Ravens* is an old book (1980) and was little reviewed when it first appeared, perhaps because of both its purpose and its contents. (The cover blurb describes it as "an unprecedented variety in Philippine literary publishing.") It is a "selection" of Philippine writing, narrower in scope than an anthology, and therefore suffers from the problem of subjective choice even more than the usual anthology. (The authors made the selections of their works themselves.) The contents are limited to the work of a small and pre-defined group of writers and therefore the book suffers in quality as well. But the volume has traded range and quality in exchange for a rather interesting portrait of a period and a group of writers. That is its chief merit.

*The Ravens* is a collection (the editor calls it a "veritable concordance") of "prize selections" spanning three decades by an "unusual writers' group." The Ravens are fifteen young writers who came together one way or another in the early fifties when "the wounds of war in (Manila) were yet to heal" (p. x). Among them the better known are Adrian Cristobal, Andres Cristobal Cruz, Elmer Ordoñez, Pacifico Aprieto, Rony Diaz, Hilario Francia, Alejandro Hufana, and Raul Ingles. Their muse was Virgie Moreno and their writings were a significant contribution to postwar Philippine writing in English.

Among the short stories in this collection are Aprieto's "The Case Against