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The Praying Man

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critical comment really on the creative process as revealed in the modern novel.

The book was obviously intended to be significant in format as well as in content. The editor says it is "done in venturesome design." And it is. The book design in glossy black is by Hilario Francia. Bodoni and Aldine Roman were used for the text and the edition was "limited to 2000 copies." But the text is unfortunately marred by numerous misprints. A glaring misspelling spoils "Batik Maker" (p. vii) and Professor Moore (to whom Philippine literature in English owes so much) is listed as "T. Inglish Moore" (p. 2). (There is more than irony in that mistake!) It is unfortunate that such a "venturesome" project, a "testament" to the Ravens, is spoiled by the proofreader's carelessness and/or ignorance of English.

But it is as a piece of Philippine literary history that *The Ravens* makes its greatest contribution. Cristobal Cruz gives us a quick introduction to the Ravens in the editor's note, "A Raven Tale." (There is a brief biography of each of the fifteen of them in the Appendix.) Adrian Cristobal's "Preface To An Imaginary Anthology" summarizes the contents and the directions of the selections included in the collection. Elmer Ordoñez's essay, "Remembered by the Clowns," chronicles the birth and tribulations of the U.P. Writer's Club and the *Literary Apprentice* from 1927 to 1957. It was a turbulent period and Ordoñez's essay deserves to be expanded into a lengthier history. In addition to the historical essays, there is the history of the Ravens themselves and the critical and literary history that is implicit in each of the selections. They dramatize rather well what Adrian Cristobal calls "the painful odyssey of the Filipino imagination in modern times" (p. 1).

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THE PRAYING MAN. By Bienvenido N. Santos. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982. 171 pages.

In "Good Readers and Good Writers," Vladimir Nabokov says: "Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth." Although indisputable, one can almost forget this after reading *The Praying Man*, for much is familiar in this book. In his review (*Observer*, 7 November 1982), Isagani Cruz comments: "Santos insists, quite rightly, that the events in his novel are pure fiction. . . . But certain fictive events are clearly inspired by actual happenings."

The plot reads like many a newspaper account of corruption in high places, of heads rolling after an exposé, of spy-thriller escapes staged by

mighty men caught in the jaws of scandal. *The Praying Man*, however, has this added dimension: it probes men's souls and exposes the weaknesses behind the ruthless masks of betrayers and manipulators.

The protagonist in *The Praying Man* is a self-made millionaire businessman, Cristino Magat, who has built an empire on the production of fake drugs. He wields power over people in government and in business through a combination of bribery and blackmail, yet still manages to project the image of philanthropist and concerned citizen before a gullible public. Even his private life is a series of manipulations, from marriage to Grace Basco, daughter of the owner of a large pharmaceutical firm; to taking his son's fiancée as his mistress; to sexual relationships with countless women.

Hard and calculating, Cris Magat almost defies sympathy—but there is one thing in his make-up that points to a certain vulnerability. Cris clings to a secret boyhood devotion to the Virgin of Antipolo, to whom he prays for aid and support each time he reaches a personal or financial crisis. Towards the end, Cris' whispered prayers become more and more frantic as he is betrayed by Naldo, his trusted aide, and his illegal activities become hot material for the press. In a series of careful, well-timed moves, he eludes the law and flies to Chicago where he stays for a while with Kosca, his faithful boyhood friend.

Meanwhile, Grace holds the fort back home, ably handling Naldo's inquisitiveness and questions from the press; and Mila Monteverde, his loyal secretary, keeps him posted. Finally, Cris is able to gather enough strength and resources to return to the Philippines and deal with the scandal in his own way. The novel ends with Cris' departure for the Philippines, a departure tinged with all the uncertainty of an aftermath:

It struck Cris that it would be different out there as soon as he landed. It would be quite a welcoming party. A lot of questions from the news media. But customs would be the first to ask its usual question, "Have you anything to declare?" Deep in his thoughts, Cris mumbled the words inaudibly.

"Pardon?" Kosca asked.

"Nothing," he said. That would be his answer too. (p. 171)

One does not read *The Praying Man* for its structure or its language—in neither area is it exceptional. The plot's upward climb from situation to climax and its gradual descent to an uncertain resolution is broken up only by occasional flashbacks—not a particularly novel or distinctive way to structure a piece of fiction. In terms of language, the book is likewise undistinguished; its tone is matter-of-fact, the descriptions, especially of places, often lacking in specificity, the words apparently meant for simple narration rather than the projection of mood and atmosphere. This "unemotional" quality in Santos' language is illustrated by the passage in which Cris discovers that his

latest mistress has left him:

He came to a door, stopped, and knocked. There was no answer. Listening, he knocked again, louder. Failing to get an answer, he took his keys and opened the door.

Taking a deep breath, he looked around. The familiar scent, an unfamiliar silence. Susan had called this room her golden cage. It was cool. Everything looked expensive, including the combs that littered the dresser. A draped glass window opened to the bay and the sky.

Cris went to the bathroom. When he came out he no longer appeared to be in a hurry. (p. 108)

Santos' sparing use of structural and verbal embellishments precludes any emotional response from the reader. But this prosaic style, seen throughout the book, serves a purpose—it keeps the reader's attention on what is really the novel's strongest point: its incisive examination of the heart and mind and soul of one man, Cris Magat. Santos is in his best form as he explores Cris' motives, thoughts and reactions in a world of ill-gotten wealth, corruption, and immorality.

Central to Cris Magat's character is his duality, a trait already hinted at by the novel's double-edged title. He is, on the one hand, truly a praying man, devoted to the Virgin of Antipolo (though this one aspect of his character he keeps carefully hidden from all except Grace, who accidentally discovers him once "kneeling on the floor, his head between his arms on a chair. Praying." [p. 51]). To his business associates however, and especially to his rivals, "C. M." is a human mantis, subtly and silently waiting for his prey and striking swiftly at just the right moment. In a ruthlessly pragmatic attitude,

Cris believed that corruption was a natural phenomenon in most business enterprises, that honesty was outmoded in this age of cunning where you do unto others before they do unto you but at the same time you maintain the public image of dedication to public service, the public good. (p. 35)

Thus, every move is calculated to bring solid financial results, without tarnishing his public image. He supports and befriends the President and other "useful" government men; chooses puppet-like individuals to make up most of his staff; skillfully controls the business options of his "buyers," whose corruption and lust make them easily exploitable.

Another aspect of Cris' duality is symbolized by the juxtaposition of two images: a medal of the Virgin of Antipolo, and a small package of prophylactics (what better symbol of modern-day hedonism?), both tucked, in a kind of cynical irreverence, into the same compartment in Cris' billfold. His attitude to the presence of these two objects in his billfold gives an intriguing angle to Cris' duality: "He felt it was as much a shame to be seen with one

as the other. . . ."

Indeed, Cris Magat is a praying/preying paradox, a man whose infidelities and calculating, manipulative handling of personal and business relationships Santos juxtaposes against the faithfulness of Grace, Mila and Kosca; the treachery of Naldo; the malleability of the "little" men whose positions of power in Cris' firm depend precisely on their clay-like qualities. To watch Cris act on these characters (he rarely, if ever, interacts, except with Kosca and perhaps Mila), is to watch his mind at work. It takes something more, however, to expose his heart and soul—a betrayal, a loss. In the final treachery, committed by a man he had once thoroughly trusted, Cris' soul-baring is completed.

In the last chapters of the novel, the praying man stands revealed—vulnerable, groping for loyalty, begging for the Virgin's aid, for once unable to control the future. But the mantis does not stop being a mantis, unless crushed beneath someone's heel. And Cris Magat is not crushed yet. He returns to the Philippines, still uncertain of the future, but determined to fight his way out of the pit of betrayal—or bring down others, big men, with him.

Bienvenido Santos' *The Praying Man* is a disturbing novel, with the unsettling realism of bad news. When one finally puts down the book, one becomes conscious of a sudden tiredness, a vague longing for some clean, free air. Confronting reality, after all, is never a restful experience.

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THE BELLRINGER AND OTHER STORIES. By Abelardo S. Albis.
Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982. 104 pages.

The fifteen stories in the collection, says Bienvenido N. Santos, "bring back an era of innocence to our times." Spanning almost half a century, they reflect a world of simpler living, of stark truths and well-defined values.

The theme of love runs like a thread through many of them: a growing boy's nascent love, the unrequited love of a poor bellringer, a young maiden's betrayed love, but mostly, maternal love. There is the mother who angrily orders her two boys out of the house, only to sing them a lullaby when she finds them sleeping in the open field; the mother refusing to believe her son will never return; the mother who prefers to see her daughter dead than allow a young man to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation; the mother disappointed over her son's refusal of a gift; a paralytic mother who gives up her child to a midwife.

The stories are literary—at times, perhaps, too literary, as when the author