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Geometries, Bright and Dark

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Mutatis mutandis, the same remark is applicable to Samar — as well as to the eastern Mindanao coast. (Incidentally, this part is not included in these essays.) Until the advent of modern transportation, these areas were isolated from the rest of the colony for about five or six months during each monsoon season. It is, therefore, not surprising that their development has been stunted, and Samar has turned out to be an unlikely subject for “an analysis of the relation between [regional] economic change . . . and the demands of the world economy” (p. 238). However, Samar served as a source of raw materials for the “real centres of Philippine economy — Cebu, Iloilo, Manila.” Somehow that island province was finally led out of its lethargy by means of “economic changes, reinforced by tighter communications and administrative systems,” as was happening elsewhere in the Philippines at the same time. Samar’s regional history, therefore, seems to disprove the validity of the editors’ methodological perspective. On the other hand, the study of this “regional backwater . . . suggests new interpretations and directions of research into the larger history of the Philippine archipelago” (p. 240).

These essays make no claim to present a total picture of Philippine society; the book’s subtitle makes that clear. But they serve as both a starting point and a guide for future historical studies, as de Jesus indicates in the concluding essay (pp. 447-53). Not sufficiently analyzed, in my view, is the demographic potential of Philippine history. History presupposes a minimum number of human agents, whose collective tensions and reactions are the ingredient of historical growth. Nor will statistics alone be enough. Their dynamism must be examined: the population increases or decreases, local and foreign migrations, health, distribution according to age, sex, occupation, who owns which property and in what proportion of the total wealth of any given region, who makes the decisions that affect community life, how the people express their joys and sorrows, etc. These are some of the issues that await the future historian.

José S. Arcilla, S.J.

GEOMETRIES, BRIGHT AND DARK. By Federico L. Espino, Jr. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1981. iv + 108 pages.

Philippine literature exists in Spanish, English, Pilipino and the vernaculars. A few writers express themselves, with varying success, in two or three of these media, but it is not often that an author writes in all four. Federico Licsi Espino Jr., one of the most prolific writers in post-war Philippine literature, is the exception. He writes in Spanish, English, Pilipino and Ilokano, and Francisco Arcellana, University of the Philippines critic and writer, says with some awe that Espino is now learning to write in Bikol! Cirilo Bautista, another Philippine poet of merit, says that Espino was born with a fountain pen in

his hand and that as a child he spoke in sprung rhythm. Espino graduated from college (UST) in 1959 and just eight years later, in 1967, he was named Poet of the Year by the Institute of National Language. He was given the Fernando Ma. Guerrero Award for Literature in 1978 and the Premio de la Literatura in 1979. He has been anthologized abroad and translated into Dutch and Bahasa Indonesia. Although Espino is perhaps best known as a poet, he has been a Palanca Award winner and *Geometries, Bright and Dark* is his third collection of stories. *The Country of Sleep* (1969) and *Percussive Blood* (1972) are the other two.

One critic describes the stories in this collection as "... short, clearly written, and ... (dealing) with people who manage to get their worlds totally snarled through taking too much literary and psychiatric culture too literally; the feast of intellect leaves the feasters with hangovers." Fermin Placido in "The Son of Pilosopong Tacio" is a good example. But perhaps the better comment is Espino's own description of the stories of one of his own characters in "The Children of Miguel Ruiz": "In these short stories ... the neuroses of Ruiz's characters crystallizes (sic) into a pillar of salt that speaks of guilt and loneliness gnawing upon the human soul" (p. 82). Loneliness and guilt (a good deal of it psychotic) are what these stories are all about.

"An Exile in Spring" is the opening story and it is quite different from the other stories in the collection. It is a traditional story of General Arsenio Ricafrente, a Philippine revolucionario in exile in Japan in the Spring of 1941, who writes his memoirs of the Revolution and wonders: "would this conjuration of the past become a life-giving document for posterity? Or would it be dismissed as tedious ephemera?" (pp. 5-6) Espino uses the seasons-history metaphor well; and the cherry blossom-kakawate contrast, as well as the Homeric swallows and leaves metaphors, are skilfully handled. But I suspect that this is an early story, for the language is still ornate and Espino is not always in control of his diction. The cherry blossoms, for example, would last only a few days "if the wind huffed, puffed and plucked" (p. 1); "the wat machine revved up, gathered speed, gathered gore. Vroomm! Vroomm!" (p. 8); "the year was rubricked with blood" (p. 8); "withering veins tributary to an old soldier's drumming heart" (p. 9); and "his gaze tinding to that subrose spark" (p. 9). "Tinding gazes" are a favorite with Espino. He uses the phrase four times in the 108 pages of the book.

Two main themes recur and reecho throughout the other ten stories in the collection. They are Religion and Freud. "Our Lady of the Crabs: A Legend for Mothers and Sons" is a neat little Marian miracle story in the tradition of Nick Joaquin's "The Legend of the Dying Wanton." "Organ Music For Saints and Lovers" is divided into "Vow of Poverty" and "Vow of Chastity," and entwines the story of a foreign missionary and an ex-seminarian. But the seduction of the seminarian by a priest (Chinese-Filipino!) and the subsequent impotence is too labored as an image of the Philippines despoiled by foreign

religion. "The Eucharist" is a startling story of a priest who loses his mind after he fathers a still-born child and the mother dies. "The Cannibals" are members of the Mystical Body and the communion of sinners. "Starting from Magdala" is a retelling of the Magdalen story from the Gospels. Three of the stories center around adultery and three are about priests.

Freudian themes are even more frequent — in the psychotic priest of the "The Eucharist" and Pilar of "Pilar Salado: Mental Case," and in allusions throughout almost all the stories. Two of the stories discuss suicide, and death is a recurrent theme in many of the other stories. Repeated references to the *Dies Irae* and to Cherubini's *Requiem* tie the Freudian and the Religion themes together in several of the stories. There are Oedipus references and psychiatrists in several other stories. The obviously autobiographical Miguel Ruiz in "The Children of Miguel Ruiz," starts to write a new story and says that "... here was a chance to depart from his Freudian themes" (p. 82). It is ironic that the story he writes is even more potentially Freudian than all the others. If Miguel is autobiographical, Espino seems to be well aware of his penchant for Freud.

Espino writes competently, although he often fumbles with idiom and strikes a disconcerting note at times. E.g., his characters are never naked; they are always "in the buff" (pp. 30, 93, 98, 102). Miguel Ruiz "spoons a piece of scrambled egg" (p. 81). Espino should know that Cherry Heering is not a wine and is never served chilled! (p. 19) There are innumerable misprints and a line is missing on page 95. But these are minor blemishes on otherwise solid and perceptive stories. "The Children of Miguel Ruiz," is, to my mind, the best story of the collection. I find a felicitous wedding here of theme and language and a great insight into both Ruiz and Robles. Espino has "felt" what he is writing about here! "Starting from Magdala" shows remarkable insights into character as well, and is all the better for not ending up in the expected and inevitable (?) way. Espino has already earned his place in Philippine post-war literature. One can only wonder what he would be capable of if he were to concentrate his considerable talents in one language and in one genre.

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