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On the Sonnets of Nina Estrada: This Love Within

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causes of the Reformation, treats succinctly and clearly the Marxist and other economic explanations, as well as that which attributes the Reformation solely to the abuses of the Church, exposing the principal arguments of leading exponents of each position. Rejecting all of these as adequate answers to the problem, while recognizing their contributions, he opts for a primarily theological interpretation. A second chapter traces the various interpretations given to the personality of Luther, with special attention to the radical re-evaluation of Luther in modern Catholic historical circles and to the efforts at a psychoanalytical approach to the Reformer. A third chapter sketches the state of the question in the debates among historians on the relations between Protestantism and capitalism.

The second part of this third section points towards the future. The author outlines a number of important points still to be clarified and areas still in need of further research. A final chapter sketches some common tendencies, attitudes, and problems of historical Protestantism and Catholicism as well as the interaction of each upon the other. Such researches are not without interest for the ecumenism of the present.

The book is solidly based on the latest and best research, Catholic, Protestant, and other. It is, moreover, written with admirable objectivity and impartiality, joined with a deep sympathy and understanding for the persons and problems it treats. For the serious student of history, to whom both its language and the structure of the series will necessarily limit it, it will be a valuable tool for the understanding of its subject.

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER, S.J.

ON THE SONNETS OF NINA ESTRADA

THIS LOVE WITHIN. By Nina Estrada. New York: Doubleday, 1965, 58 pp.

Miss Estrada's book is poetry, a collection of 56 love sonnets narrating a virginal young woman's response to a man's love, their affair, their parting, and her rather unresolved survival of the parting (unresolved because in sonnet 54 she's plotting her "sweet revenge," in 55 she drops vengeance for a *carpe diem* attitude, and in 56 she drops that to proclaim a transcendent new beginning of her life. All of which makes it hard to believe any attitude lasts longer than its 14th line.) The poems are personal, though rarely more than conventionally so, and taken together they can convey a feminine intensity which is perhaps their strongest point.

Their weakest point poetically is imprecision—a fault which takes its toll in a discouraging number of ways. Firstly, it means pure fuzziness; as in “Make me the puppet by your wish ordained. The shadow and reflection of your world,” which appears in the very first poem. Shadow or reflection? They’re awfully different things, and here the poet really *uses* neither; she merely says both, and consequently a potentially powerful concept comes to nothing. Similarly, in sonnet 5: “Against your smiles I bolt my windows tight.” Why defend yourself with windows (which are seen through) against smiles (which are seen)? Sometimes such lack of precision can be attributed to the necessity of filling out a poetic line. How else account for “Of half-remembered, half-forgotten melodies,” “I keep remembering your eyes somehow,” or “Each time you came in view within my sight.”

There is also the problem of rhyme. Sonnet 4 ends in the following couplet: “Yes, but though today I have mere silhouette,/ This love within shall find expression yet.” It is a couplet which has no connection with the rest of the poem (the other images are of suffering and fire) and its entire existence seems to rest upon the fact that silhouette rhymes with yet. The same pragmatism accounts for “For while I wake my heart pulsates your name,/ And when I sleep, it calls you just the same,” for “...destroyed/The one pagoda of my wisdom heart,/Blew out the flame that was the beacon part,” for “with knowing you I cast this world aside/ As tragic anti-climax gaping wide.”

There are other examples and always their makeshift quality is obvious because they say so little anyway. What is a “wisdom heart”? And what does gaping wide really have to do with anti-climax? The poems do not create an answer—the words are simply employed for whatever vague emotion comes ready-made with them and for the rhythm and rhyme gaps they fill.

Imprecision doesn’t only affect diction in Miss Estrada’s poetry. It also marks most of her poetic thought, and probably largely accounts for the absence of unity in many of the sonnets. An imprecise idea isn’t easy to pursue. It’s more likely to become heaped over with more imprecision. Sonnet 15 is an example. She wants her lover “To break these chains that bind me, enslaved/ By own fears and frights.” Then she drops that thought, and says: “A timid shame does bind/ My soul in restless inactivity.” One line later she wants him to:

Tear down the giant cobwebs of my mind,
That pent-up tenderness at last may find
Its way to you like river seeking sea.

Those may be valid enough expressions of desire, but there is certainly none of the tension, logic, or deliberate clarity of viable poetry. Nothing is pursued. We drift from "fears and frights" to "timid shame" to "giant cobwebs," and finally latch onto a river-sea simile—which is discarded in the next line for a mountain climbing metaphor ("Released, I'd scale the heights of ecstasy,/ Incur the envy of the gods.") Meanwhile, she has requested her lover to have courage, love and understanding. Of course, he should have courage, love, and understanding; but you don't write a good poem by throwing such monumental requests around, or by multiplying commonplace images. Sonnet 15 isn't the only poem made like this; 6, 8, 9, 37, 44, 46, and 48 are nearly as unstrung.

Even deeper than poetic imprecision (and probably contributing to it), there is in the poems an unsettling disjunction of attitudes towards sex. In the introduction to the volume Claro Recto praises the poet's "boldness" and "sincerity" in dealing with sex. He believes that future students of Philippine poetry will find in the sonnets "an expression of every woman's suppressed desires, often too frightened and too timid to be unleashed." But it seems more likely that future students will find the inconsistencies and painful efforts to be unpuritanical that mar the poems.

Throughout, the speaker seems to be trying to convince herself she can love without fearing to love, but at the same time she again and again fails to rise above the confused trappings of an unacknowledged puritanism. As a result of this dilemma the poems are heavily leaded with two attitudes that diminish the credibility of protestations of rich and selfless love, namely, non-integration of physical love, and a deep passiveness that is not to be negotiated and that makes a point of fixing responsibility for the good and the bad in the whole situation to something outside of it.

Most often this something outside is a vague personification of fate. Early in the poems the speaker talks of her "fettered destiny" and "crucified desire," of "the crime of ill-starred longing," of cards dealt, and plans that Fate mislaid. And in the end she still speaks with detachment of "my cheated fate," of "a sad love that died/ Through no fault of its own," and of "love doomed from the start." And she compares herself with Heloise because now she's been through as much. Maybe so; but her insistence on herself as acted upon makes this seem unlikely to the reader, and detracts appreciably from the immediacy of much of her sentiment.

The unintegrated sex is harder to pinpoint, especially when efforts are simultaneously being made to demonstrate integration. But it's there—in concepts like "barbaric" conquest and "rapture after vandalism." And in lines like

I only know my need for you is great.
 And yet this truth that angels will deny
 Escapes fulfillment with its dawning late. (6)

where the angel reference is strictly gratuitous, having no function other than to fill out the line. Similarly there is

...remember this
 Of me: no mortal woman's fervent kiss
 Was ever born of heights angelical
 As these I give to you. (40)

Sex in these instances is being defined with reference to things "below" it and "above" it. It is rarely met and celebrated head on in the poems. And the rare times that it is the reader learns to expect a retreat (intellectualizing or a statement of passivity) in the next poem, or the next quatrain.

Altogether there is little to recommend the sonnets as a collection. Having them all together makes their imprecision, inconsistency, and slackness more obvious than their intended honesty and their occasional lyric vision.

MAUREEN SULLIVAN

SPIRITUALITY IN THE EAST AND WEST

LES AGES DE LA VIE SPIRITUELLE. By Paul Evdokimov.
 Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1964. 236 pp.

The author, one of the outstanding scholars of the Orthodox Church in the West, is a professor at the Saint Sergius Institute of Technology and the director of the Orthodox Center of Studies in Paris. The question this book proposes to answer is whether traditional asceticism meets the needs of today. By tracing the main currents of spirituality in the East and West the author tries to show how people of today's technical world can rediscover the way of recollection, contemplative prayer, and interior peace that dispose the soul for more profound union with God. The book is a good introduction to the spirituality of the Christian East—Egypt, Syria, Byzantium, and Russia—and at the same time an attempt to answer some of the difficulties that modern man encounters in the spiritual life.

THOMAS J. O'SHAUGHNESSY, S.J.