

# philippine studies

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**The Waiter and the Fisherman and Other Essays  
in Literature and Culture  
by Miguel A. Bernad, S.J.**

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 56, no. 4 (2008): 493—495

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# Book Reviews

MIGUEL A. BERNAD, S.J.

## **The Waiter and the Fisherman and Other Essays in Literature and Culture**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008. 161 pages.

Since the 1950s, Miguel A. Bernad, S. J., has been writing scholarly articles, editing journals (he was in fact an Associate Editor of *Philippine Studies* and a contributor to this journal's first and several issues), delivering lectures, and maintaining a column in a national newspaper. Given the sheer volume of his work, it seems only appropriate that his writings would be periodically collected. *The Waiter and the Fisherman* is the latest compilation.

The book gathers together twelve of his essays from the last century, forty-six years separating the first from the last. As a collection, it shows his varied interests (English and American literature, the classics, Philippine literature and culture, Jose Rizal, and teaching, among other things) and the wealth of his erudition, arguably unsurpassed by anyone else's in Philippine literary criticism.

One group of essays consists of commentaries on English and American literature: "Poetry by Allusion," "T. S. Eliot's *Nightingales*: A Reading," "The Waiter and the Fisherman," and "The Visual Element in Literature." In the first essay, Bernad explicates lines from *The Wasteland* to illustrate T. S. Eliot's complex use of allusion. In Eliot it is not enough simply to identify a reference; the critic must trace the references to their original contexts, in light of which the poet's purpose may be inferred. Obviously such a method of explication requires much learning of the critic. "T. S. Eliot's Nightin-

gales” may be seen as an extended illustration of that method and proof of what insights it can spark. “The Waiter and the Fisherman” contrasts the worldview expressed in Hemingway’s short story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and his novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. While the short story expresses “the essential hopelessness of life” (77), the novel affirms faith in both human nature (“fallen but essentially good” [78]) and God. Bernad favors the novel: “*The Old Man and the Sea* affirms all the values previously denied in Hemingway’s earlier works. For this reason (despite the mannerisms of a lifetime which often intrude to annoy the reader) *The Old Man and the Sea* may be called a great work” (78). “The Visual Element in Literature,” the last essay in the collection, contests, through a catalogue of quotations, William Meyer Jr.’s thesis that American culture is “hypervisual” and European culture is “hyperverbal” (146). He demonstrates that European literature is equally visual, but he does not touch the other side of Meyer’s thesis.

One might classify “Truth in Literature” and “The Nature of Literature and Five Pedagogical Corollaries” as exercises in literary theory. In the first, he revisits a classic question in literary theory. Bernad leans on Aristotle’s idea that literature depicts universal truths, unlike history, which depicts particular truths. “The historian deals with man’s acts; the poet and the playwright and the storyteller deal with man’s nature” (46). Positing that “man’s nature” is essentially good and even capable of heroism, Bernad criticizes much of modern literature, in which “men are represented as if they were automatons, creatures of feeling and of chance, possessing no free-will. . . . Life is depicted as meaningless. This is not to mirror life but to distort it; not to depict the truth but to broadcast a lie” (47). The essay is significant for being perhaps the clearest articulation of Bernad’s critical orientation, which places him in the venerable tradition of humanist criticism, and accounting for his evaluation of Hemingway in the title essay. “The Nature of Literature and Five Pedagogical Corollaries” draws the practical implications of literature defined as “memorable thought memorably expressed” (15) on the teaching of literature. Of the essays in the book, it is the one with the most practical value.

His thoughts on Philippine literature form another group. “Philippine Literature: Perpetually Inchoate,” a controversial and now classic text in Philippine literary criticism, identifies the linguistic and cultural drawbacks to Philippine literature. The essay was written in 1957. In this compilation, Bernad adds a postscript in which he contends that Philippine literature “is no longer inchoate” (41). “Philippine Literature and the Theological Di-

mension,” another controversial piece, notes the absence of a theological dimension—“a work has a theological dimension if it deals with the ultimate questions regarding human existence” (136)—in Philippine letters, a state of affairs that he contends is not necessarily bad. “The Poets of the Philippine Revolution” is a survey of Spanish poems by Fernando Ma. Guerrero, Cecilio Apostol, and Jose Palma.

In two essays, Bernad reads Rizal’s poems. In “The Nature of Rizal’s Farewell Poem,” Bernad posits that “Mi Ultimo Adios” must be seen as a love song, a reading that, though plausible, he does not sustain. “German Flowers and a Song by the Lakeside” explicates “Flores de Heidelberg” and the song of Maria Clara in *Noli me Tangere* as illustrations of the theme of homelessness.

Finally, “Philippine Culture and the Filipino Identity” responds to the question of nationhood. What makes a Filipino, given that the Philippines is made up of various cultural groups and was subject to foreign powers? Bernad answers that “accidentals can change; essentials should remain” (99). The “essential” Filipino is “polite,” “hospitable,” “respectful,” “grateful,” and “brave” (99–100).

Throughout the book, Bernad is both learned and lucid, his ideas buttressed by the grand pillars of Christian humanism. Still, one is tempted to ask: what place does such kind of criticism have in contemporary cultural studies where the order of the day seems to be to destabilize rather than to fix the meaning of texts, where such notions as “a great work,” “meaning,” “essential culture,” “human nature,” and even “literature” are held in suspicion? Why reprint essays on Eliot and Hemingway in postcolonial Philippines? Readers may object (and not always without reason) to some of Bernad’s pronouncements or presuppositions, but his is, if retrospective, a refreshing and sobering alternative, the still small voice after the earthquake and the fire. Granting his premises, Bernad’s conclusions are illuminating. More important, in his essays on Eliot, Bernad takes the British and American critics, including the venerable Cleanth Brooks, to task. A Philippine author disrupting canonical readings of canonical Western texts: is that not a way of “writing back”?

Bernad spent the last half century writing essays like those in *The Waiter and the Fisherman*; the present millennium yet needs the clarity of his critical vision.

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