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The Father and the Maid, by Gonzalez

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Here it is revealed that the book shall come to full fruition when, armed with the book, its glossary and Appendix 3 "A Church Documentation Checklist" and 4 "A Church Art Description Form" someone other than the author shall match his skill and painstaking work and carefully document the church where he worships. Then and only then shall we stem the hemorrhaging of our cultural heritage which can so easily be obliterated by natural calamities and which "many of us (almost always with good intentions) are destroying" (p. 9).

As I write this review I am saddened to hear that the museum of the Pan-ay church, the most exquisite Augustinian church in Capiz, was robbed of its ivory images and jewelry. Sad to say, the museum's acquisitions were not adequately documented. Some of its art pieces may now be in private hands, with some rich folk taking solitary delight in the heritage of a people. If Jose's book can help stop this plague, then the countless journeys he has made would be well rewarded. But then to stop such a plague many more need to match the love that the author has shown for our colonial heritage.

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The Father and the Maid: Essays on Filipino Life and Letters. By N.V.M. Gonzalez. Quezon City. University of the Philippines Press, 1990.

N.V.M. Gonzalez's niche in Philippine Literature in English is assured. Edilberto de Jesus says that "the stages of his development as a writer coincide with the stages in the development of the literature itself . . . to trace his growth as an artist . . . is to trace the growth of Philippine Literature in English." Three novels (*The Winds of April*, 1941, *A Season of Grace*, 1956, and *The Bamboo Dancers*, 1957) and five collections of short stories (*Seven Hills Away*, 1947, *Children of the Ash Covered Loam*, 1951, *Look Stranger On This Island Now*, 1963, *Selected Stories*, 1964, and *Mindoro and Beyond*, 1979) have given ample evidence of his human perception, his skill and craftsmanship as a writer, and earned him recognition as the recipient of the *Gawad Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas* (Balagtas National Award) and the Cultural Center of the Philippines 1990 *Gawad Para sa Sining* (Award for Arts) for Literature. Leonard Casper says that "not even in Hemingway has the ritual of everyday detail, the skill of living, been resorted to with greater devotion . . . It has a movement nearly unique . . . De Jesus writes that "The problem is that of understanding one's self; and self knowledge, at least in Gonzalez's fiction, is something every man must strive for."

The Father and the Maid is the other side of Gonzalez, the writer—the critic and the man of letters. These six essays on Filipino life and letters were

originally given as lectures for the Creative Writing Center of the University of the Philippines. They are exercises in criticism—the recovery (discovery?) of meaning in a half dozen texts—Manuel Arguilla, Aida Rivera Ford, Merimée, Chekhov, Naipaul and Rao. (The range of subjects is a measure of the range of Gonzalez's literary mind.) But "Instead of dealing with the rigidity of predetermined structures, he . . . (accepts) the invitation to excel in responding to the literary text. To seize the indeterminacy and fill the gaps in the artistic construction with materials from his own sensibility" (p. 50)

The best of the essays, to my mind, is the title essay, "The Father and the Maid" which discusses "geography" and "time" in Arguilla's "How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife" and Aida Rivera Ford's "Love In The Corn Husks." It is a superb example of "close reading" or of *explicacion du texte*. Gonzalez has opened many doors to a deeper understanding of the text and the nature of literary criticism. Gonzalez says: "It might strike many readers as a surprise, but it is perfectly possible to study fiction—and modern fiction at that—by drawing texts from Philippine literature." (p. 1) "The Road From Porto Vecchio" describes the role of the narrator in Prosper Merimée's "Mateo Falcone" as an example of the narrative as a "means by which human beings represent and structure the world." (p. 26) "The Lady With the Dog" deals with "Anton Chekhov's legacy to literature and in particular to Third World sensibility" (p. 27). Gonzalez's comments on archetypal seekers in Chekhov have many resonances for the analysis of Philippine Literature in English. "The Novel and Its Reader" is a reflection on fiction and history and "cultural departures." "Of the many art forms that the Filipino has worked with, story telling seems to be the one he has held considerable hope for, in relation to his society's articulation with history" (p. 42). "The Novel In The Third World" is "a note on the house of fiction and on V.S. Naipaul's *A Home for Mr. Biswas* and Rajah Rao's *Kanthapura*" (p. 52). Gonzalez quotes with approval Rao's comment with its obvious implications for Philippine Literature: "We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians, We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression, therefore, has to be a dialect which will one day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or American. Time alone will justify it." (p. 62) The final essay, "Towards A National Literature" is "on the tension between history and literature and a writer-and-subject relationship under a theory of narrative which goes beyond language and cultures . . ." (p. 64) Gonzalez's evaluation is not a happy one: ". . . to take stock as to which portions of our national experience have been rendered in books . . . is to be shocked at the admission that there are too few of them in each generation to carry on. By way of a cover, we bemoan our lack of readers, the educational system, the national language problem, etc., etc." (p. 70) "Could

it be that perhaps we have used our talent to date, in the service of recovering merely the experienced reality? Our range of offerings at this level has been remarkable, even as we keep trying out as best as we can, and with varying virtuosity, our control of a received language or our retrieval of one threatened by cavalier neglect and ill-use" (p. 68). We have not rendered "our very own story for the world" (p. 68).

The Father And The Maid is proof that N.V.M. Gonzalez continues—in both his fiction and his criticism—to tell the Filipino story to the world. Not all will agree with Gonzalez's telling of that story, for he maintains that Philippine literature must be indigenized but he also says "we are discovering that something is lost by staying rooted to the native tradition," (p. 59). But no one can deny the skill with which he tells it in these reflections on world literature in the context of Philippine culture, and on Philippine Literature against the background of the literature of the world. They are "new approaches to the importance of being Filipino."

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