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Firewalkers, by Casper

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FIREWALKERS. By Leonard Casper. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987. 187 pages.

This review comes late (*Firewalkers* includes critical essays up to 1984 and was published in 1987) but it comes as a well-deserved tribute to Leonard Casper who has been a critic of Philippine literature for almost forty years and a "missionary" for Philippine literature since 1956, "trying to educate the American public beyond the limited images of the Filipino offered by Villa, Bulosan, Romulo and Carunungan" (p. 6). Casper's Preface to this collection is a biographical note which outlines his own discovery and celebration of Filipino writers—first with Felixberto Sta. Maria and Amador Daguio at Stanford in 1951-52, and then three years at the University of the Philippines from 1953 to 1956 where he met N.V.M. Gonzalez, Franz Arcellana, Andy Cruz, Rony Diaz, Godo Roperos, Adrian Cristobal, Alex Hufana, Virgie Moreno, Ben Santos and Maneng Viray. Casper later spent a year (1962-63) as a Fulbright lecturer at the UP and the Ateneo de Manila and another year in Manila in 1968-69, doing research mostly on vernacular literature. He returned to Manila for shorter periods in 1973 and 1978. All this, Casper writes, not only justifies "the longstanding faith that some of us have had of the quality of Philippine literature, whatever its language, but reassure(s) us all that the Filipino as critic-historian has a deep, enduring capacity for objective research" (p. 8). Evidence of Casper's missionary zeal for Philippine literature are five volumes on Philippine literature, three special Philippine issues of American magazines, as well as innumerable articles on Philippine criticism in over a dozen periodicals. It is the gentlest of ironies and the most sincere of compliments, that American-born Casper, itinerant and admiring visitor to the Philippines, did so much to bring Philippine literature to the attention of both Philippine and American critics.

Firewalkers does not rank among Casper's greater collections of criticism on Philippine literature. These would certainly include the seminal *Six Filipino Poets* (1955) in which Casper said: "The reconnaissance begins." (That was Casper's word for Philippine literature after the war—recognition, rather than renaissance or rebirth.) Casper's contribution should certainly be measured by *The Wayward Horizon* (1961), *The Wounded Diamond* (1964) and *New Writing From the Philippines* (1966) which educated a generation of Philippine literary students and scholars in Philippine writing in English. *Firewalkers*, as Casper himself notes, is more of a "concelebration," offered by "a modest participant" in the critical efforts of the postwar period, as a "continuing celebration of Philippine creativity (p. 8)." The essays in *Firewalkers*, Casper concludes in his Preface, are "measured arguments from a relentlessly fervid" *amicus curiae* of Philippine literature.

Casper's two great contributions, even as modest participant, to Philippine criticism, were his emphasis on thematics and on language. Casper was a stout defender of Eliot's definition of the function of criticism: the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste. What is the text saying, and how well is the author saying it? Casper taught a critical awareness of the text,

rather than of the social conditions of the text. One might argue whether that is the function of criticism (Philippine critics have largely repudiated it and abandoned it in recent years) but perhaps that critical approach is not a bad first step for a literature just beginning to make the language (English) its own—to write “from” English and not just “in” English, as Abad has explained. The emphasis on thematics and on language in much of Casper’s criticism was critically and historically relevant. It came at a time when it was necessary to raise the language of Philippine literature and criticism in English, from the level of “apprenticeship” in the language to that of “Master Workman.”

One may lament that critics and even writers are outdated and no longer relevant, but one should measure them in their own time and against their own standards. Casper must be measured in his own context, not by subsequent variations in literary taste. Although Casper’s New Criticism has now been largely abandoned, repudiated and even castigated (unfairly) in Philippine literary circles, Casper’s criticism taught a generation of Filipinos “close reading” and “explication” of the text. It was not a bad thing, to focus on the text as Philippine literature in English grew to maturity. Time enough for social criticism and deconstruction when one has understood the text. Better first to understand, and then to contextualize. One can not run with the text until one has learned to read. (See Casper’s own defense of New Criticism against its Philippine critics in “The Critic of Philippine Literature as Provocateur,” pp. 107-19).

Two essays in *Firewalkers* are good examples of Casper’s criticism. “Great Shouting and Greater Silences: The Novels of Bienvenido Santos” is a good example of the thematic approach.

Thematically, the novels of Bienvenido Santos share a natural affinity with his three volumes of short stories. His concern, consistently, has been with man’s imperfect attempts to satisfy an innermost need to belong to others—to be able to say of a family, a community, a culture, a kind, that these are his. However, although the anguish of incomplete attachment is common to characters in both Santos’ novels, the narrative surfaces of these two works make a striking contrast. *Villa Magdalena* is deeply textured, highly organized and predictable. In style, *The Volcano* is open, direct, unsophisticated; in structure, straightforward except for conventional flashbacks and shifts in angles of vision. (p. 21)

The second essay of critical importance in this collection is “A Pluralistic View of Filipinism in Philippine Literature” in which Casper stakes out a claim for the universality of criticism and the avoidance of all narrow or too rigidly defended positions which would distort the value of the literature itself.

Both pride and curiosity compel a people, too long measured against someone else’s models, to recover a part of their own and plan for a future based on new consistencies. Yet it is critical that this movement . . . take the form of examination, rather than precipitate sanctification, or premises

pure and simple. Otherwise self recovery can deteriorate into self-suffocation. Openmindedness will be most clearly signaled when the question "What is Filipino about Filipino literature in English?" can be considered real, rather than rhetorical . . . (p. 133)

In that same essay, Casper pleads for universalism in content as well. Casper writes that if "Filipinism is defined so that Filipinos fall outside the circle of all that is profoundly significant in human nature" that would be the "ultimate alienation" (p. 139).

Attitudes toward the proper relationship between literature and society, so long expressed in doctrinaire or sentimental fashions equally inflexible, seem now to require at least rationalization. And in this process of definition and documentation, modes of reconciliation or at least of pluralistic perspective conceivably may emerge. (p. 133)

It is a tribute to Casper, foreigner that he is, but critic *par excellence* in Philippine literature in English, that in that dialectic, his views of Philippine literature have played a significant role.

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COLLECTED VERSE. By Nick Joaquin. Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 1987. 109 pages.

Nick Joaquin is less known, unfortunately, for his poetry than for his prose—fiction, biography, drama and essay. That is an unhappy quirk of literary history or literary taste, for although Joaquin marches to a different drum than most contemporary Philippine poets in English, his poems rank among the best in postwar poetry in the Philippines. They are classical, intellectual, rhetorical and crafted—words of high praise, though different from the adjectives critics usually ascribe to contemporary poetry on the Philippine literary scene.

Joaquin has written in all the genres. It is a tribute to his versatility and his literary imagination. *Prose and Poems* marked the beginning of the postwar era in Philippine Writing in English (1952). It was followed by *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, still the best Philippine novel in English (1961), *La Naval de Manila and Other Essays*, which established his reputation as an historical essayist (1964). *Tropical Gothic* (1972), *A Question of Heroes* (1977), *Almanac For Manileños* (1979), *Tropical Baroque* (1979), *Cave and Shadows*, which is mistitled as *Caves and Shadows* on the cover of this latest volume (1983), and *The Aquinos of Tarlac* (1983). Later came various biographies, and such works as *Culture and History* (1988) and *The World of Damian Domingo* (1990). Add to this the innumerable journalistic pieces and you have the canon of one of the best writers in English in postwar Philippines.