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Lourdes H. Vidal

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Echoes and Reflections in *Villa Magdalena*
LOURDES H. VIDAL

Two themes recur in the fictional works of Bienvenido Santos: the alienation/nostalgia of the exile and the loneliness/corruption of the poor boy searching for himself in the world of the rich. These themes are fully developed in two pairs of novels published almost twenty years apart. Despite the time difference, the novels maintain a continuing development into the varying manifestations of these two central themes. Each pair depicts the two themes using appropriate fictional devices.

The 1983 *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor* and the 1965 *The Volcano* depicted the feelings and problems of the exile: the first, in America and the second, in the Philippines. Two sides of the same nostalgia and alienation were presented.

The 1983 novel told the familiar Santos story of the Filipino in America. Solomon King drifted from one job to another and from one affair to another. Believing himself dying, he retired from his job as supervisor of operations in the same company where he had started as a hog butcher. He traveled all over America visiting old friends and lovers. He also made transient friendships and had a passing love affair with a younger woman. His only permanent identification was his resemblance to the dead American matinee idol, Robert Taylor.

The 1965 book took up the other side of Santos' own wartime exile. The Hunters, an American family, lived in Bicol before, during and after the Japanese Occupation. A doctor and preacher, Paul Hunter, served with sympathy and compassion the Filipinos suffering from disease, natural calamities, poverty and the war. But even with the death of his son in the guerrilla movement,

he could not fully accept the marriage of his daughter to a Filipino blinded by the Japanese for refusing to betray the Hunter's hiding place. In the face of the rising anti-American sentiment after the war, he prepared to return to America with his wife and daughter after a thirty-year absence.

These two alienation novels are a curious pairing of differences and similarities. Two heroes of different nationalities, a Filipino and an American, were inversely exiled in the two homelands, the United States and the Philippines. The Filipino did not have the commitment that the American as missionary and doctor had to the foreign land and the alien people. Despite these differences, both heroes realized in the end that they could not fully accept nor be fully accepted by the natives of the foreign land.

The 1982 *The Praying Man* and the 1965 *Villa Magdalena* developed the second theme of the poor boy's corruption in the bad world of big business and the luxury-loving rich. Two Sulucan, Tondo boys found their way into the alien world through different means.

The 1982 novel chronicled the phenomenal climb of Crisanto Magat to a position of power and wealth. First he married the only daughter of his boss who owned a drug manufacturing company. Through political machination and widespread bribery he amassed his fortune by selling diluted drugs to government hospitals until a government betrayal caught up with him. The novel, told in a straight storyline with few flashbacks, ended with letters as Magat in America waited for the right opportunity to fight his detractors.

In the 1965 novel, the Sulucan boy, Alfredo Medallada, did not work his way up as Magat did. He was taken in by Don Magno Medallada. Don Magno was the poor Pampango boy who established the world of Villa Magdalena through his marriage into the rich Conde family and his heartless manipulation of others.

Three generations of highly emotional and intensely lustful characters restlessly moved in and out of the villa. Obsessions and neuroses were passed on from one character to another, from generation to generation. These recurring forms of physical, psychological and spiritual aberrations were manifested in physical actions. Characters mirrored each other's actions in a moving pattern brought about by departure, aging or death. This mirror-

ing device was used throughout the novel not just as a recurring pattern but as an image to imply the infectious nature and hypnotic appeal of the world of the rich.

Alfredo, a working student, was taken in as an all-around boy by Don Magno because he had the same Medallada family name. This original resemblance of the Sulucan boy to the rich man mounted as Alfredo inevitably graduated to become Don Magno's right hand man and later his heir. Alfredo also took his place as husband or lover to the lustful Conde women. Alfredo, by simply becoming one of them, took his place in the mirror-image pattern which dominated the entire novel. The visual aspect of this reflection pattern was strengthened by the resonance of the auditory aspect: the echo device. These two aspects were combined in one character whose only role in the novel was to embody them in a dramatic way.

Balatong seems to be one of the many minor characters in *Villa Magdalena*. As a servant she does not have a specified work in the house or in the garden. She hovers around Don Magno but she does not directly serve the master. Balatong, which literally means "in error" in the Kapampangan language, echoes words and sounds she overhears and mimics actions she sees. She is like a puppet who must be triggered into action by others. Her actions do not have any effect on the decisions of other characters. She does not avert or bring about any catastrophe. She is a tolerated, useless but comic nuisance in the house.

Don Magno, however, loves her company so he protects her from the others. This fact probably leads to the rumor that she is his mother. As the image of Don Magno's shadowy past and humble beginnings, Balatong strikes just the right ironic note in her contrast to his very personality and present status. The personal magnetism that attracted the beautiful Conde heiress and the drive and cunning he used in amassing his fortune are emphasized in contrast to the idiocy and subservience of Balatong who does not even have the energy for ordinary human desires.

Balatong is twice a comic relief in the novel. In a literary sense her antics serve as diversions when the characters' actions become extremely serious and their emotions painfully intense. Whenever Doña Asuncion and Don Magno quarrel bitterly, she parodies their words into mispronounced expressions. The quarrels become bearable and unmelodramatic because Balatong's buffoonery

deviates attention from the searing hatred between the Don and his sister-in-law. In the literal sense Balatong is a source of amusement for the masters and servants in the villa. Doña Asuncion also enjoys Balatong's show. The presence of and need for a comic fool in the villa reveal the emptiness of the characters' lives. Something must be wrong when people who have everything to make them happy still need an idiot to make them laugh together.

Balatong's characterization is less than a flat character but more than a caricature. Her actions and words are mostly burlesque imitations. When not prodded into antics, she sits immobile in her corner or she squats in an attitude of prayer on the floor. There are only five instances when she seems to act on her own. However, even these five actions are passive or unintentional. They may be mute: her shaking her head in response to Alfredo's sign-language question; ineffectual: her shouting at the cats to stop making love; bewildered: her going in and out of Isabel's room after her elopement with Sol; static: her standing like a statue in prayer before Nora's room; or ritualistic: her kissing Doña Magdalena's hand and walking on her knees out of the room.

Balatong appears or is mentioned more or less thirty times in the novel. This seems a rather lengthy treatment for a minor character or a comic foil. She seems omnipresent and omniscient within the villa. She hovers over all the rooms. She has ears at all the walls and eyes in all the keyholes. Her echo pervades the whole house. Her mutterings and mumblings accompany all moans and lamentations. This prolonged treatment and the pervasive quality of her spell make her an essential flavoring although not a main ingredient in the novel.

Villa Magdalena has many melodramatic scenes. The characters shout and wail. Their hatred is caustic and destructive. Their loves and lust are ungovernable and overflowing. Even the physical manifestations of their emotions are unrehearsed and uncontrolled. Balatong's echoings dissipate the shouted voices and in the repetition neutralize the emotional fervor of angry words. Her actions also sunder the words from their original passionate motivation. Her mimicking reduces the actions into meaningless gestures. In short, her constant movement and repetition diffuse the melodramatic atmosphere around the characters.

Nora is the first to fear the power of Balatong's echolalia. Her love affair with Alfredo can be exposed. No secret known to this servant can remain hidden. Balatong, without effort or reason and in front of anyone or everyone, can ape their physical gyrations and echo their sensual moans. Even Eliza and Alfredo feel the oppressive atmosphere generated by Balatong's prescience in the villa. She acts as deterrent and two-way mirror of the secret actions of others. They cannot see her and her audience as she plainly reenacts their lovemaking complete with louder sounds.

Don Magno keeps three mirrors in his study. A real mirror shows him his present physical appearance. His bust reminds him of what he was. The echoing mimic reduces to nonsense his most profound pronouncements. As a mirror, Balatong enables others to see themselves in a clearer light. She echoes and mimics without admiration or condemnation. Her responses are neither sympathetic nor apathetic. They are her natural reactions, indifferent and unpremeditated most of the time.

Balatong's physical symptom of idiocy is her inability to control her voice, her saliva, her words and her limbs. The inability of her mind to control her bodily motions, which represents a spiritually infectious disease, is shared by the others. Isabel, Nora, Eliza and Alfredo have bodily hungers that must be satisfied. Don Magno's body deteriorates, despite his sharp mind and strong character, into a quivering, palpitating mass of hands and feet. Doña Magdalena's mind decays as she takes Doña Asuncion's place in her wheelchair. Doña Magdalena insists she herself died, not her sister.

Balatong's life outside the villa is never mentioned. She does not leave and has never left the confines of the house. Her loyalty and character serve to suggest distinct characteristics of the villa and the life within. An echo can only sound in a walled large space. The villa holds a tight all-embracing spell on the others. Its hollowness gives the echo a resonance. Balatong with her wails and antics officiates in the loud and meaningless but hypnotic ceremonials of a large and hollow temple.

There are other echoes and mimics in the novel. Voices in intense love or hatred echo through the halls. Nora closes the door with echoing thunder. Isabel, talking to Alfredo, repeats Eliza's words. Actions of one character are repeated by others. Nora leaves her husband to elope with another man, as did Isabel before

her. Eliza makes love with Alfredo as Nora did in the same room. The cathedral now dwarfs the villa as the villa used to dominate the weeds and garbage heap the cathedral supplanted.

Balatong does not die in the novel. She just moves out of her usual corner. Her unperceived exit coincides with the establishment of the echo-mirror patterns in the others. Alfredo now thinks and sounds so like Don Magno that the echo of his voice startles him. He is called Don Alfredo by the servants. In the end there is no need for an idiotic echo and mimic because the other mimics have taken the places of their models while the large hollow rooms of the villa are bursting with cathedral chimes.