

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Men Who Play God

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Philippine Studies vol. 31, no. 4 (1983) 505–508

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Part IV, "Sociological Readings of the New Testament," contains seven substantial essays: R. Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research" (pp. 337-56); J.P. Brown, "Techniques of Imperial Control: The Background of the Gospel Event" (pp. 357-77); G.V. Pixley, "God's Kingdom in First-Century Palestine: The Strategy of Jesus" (pp. 378-93); E.S. Fiorenza, "'You are Not to Be Called Father': Early Christian History in a Feminist Perspective" (pp. 394-417); L. Schottroff, "Women as Followers of Jesus in New Testament Times: An Exercise in Social-Historical Exegesis of the Bible" (pp. 418-27); J.G. Gager, "Social Description and Sociological Explanation in the Study of Early Christianity: A Review Essay" (pp. 428-40); and R.H. Smith, "Were the Early Christians Middle-Class? A Sociological Analysis of the New Testament" (pp. 441-57).

The final section of the book Part V: "The Bible in Political Theology and Marxist Thought," views the Bible in "current radical theology and political thought." Four representative essays are included: A.F. McGovern, "The Bible in Latin American Liberation Theology" (pp. 461-72); A Fierro, "Exodus Event and Interpretation in Political Theologies" (pp. 473-81); J.L. Segundo, "Faith and Ideologies in Biblical Revelation" (pp. 482-96); and R.J. Siebert, "Jacob and Jesus: Recent Marxist Readings of the Bible" (pp. 497-517).

The three indexes of Scriptural References, Names, and Subjects (pp. 519-44) render this anthology eminently usable.

Philip J. Calderone, S.J.

THE MEN WHO PLAY GOD. By Arturo B. Rotor. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1983. 147 pages.

The men who play God are doctors, as the title story in this collection says. And indeed they weigh the pros and cons of a patient's case with the ease of deities who award antibiotics and bedspace instead of eternal beauty and everlasting life. The irony in the title story is sharp; the contrastive imagery between the excerpts from a historical document and the painful throb of life in the hospital itself lends deep pathos; the medical language (as in all the stories) establishes authenticity; and the stark reality of the business of healing ("Admit the patient whose clinical condition furnishes interesting material for study, investigation and research. . . . Do not admit the hopeless, for whom nothing can be done, no terminal cancer, advanced liver disease or contagious disease.") sears the unwary mind. But the second story with the rather intriguing title of "The Orchid of Five Wounds" and the "The Balik-bayan Doctor" are easily the best in the collection.

"The Orchid of Five Wounds" plays with what one might term "literary brinkmanship." Its formula has been tried and found wanting: the young and restless resident, the hopelessly blind, tremulously lovely sixteen-year old

patient suddenly given a chance to see once more. The barren, antiseptic setting and the motley collection of characters all sympathetic to the cause of love. The resident feels the blood rush to his head and pound in his temples at the touch of the blind girl, and his restless soul seems to find solace at last, for they share a love for roses and lilies and dahlias. When the doctor hands the pretty patient a flower she cannot recognize by smell or touch, he says it is the orchid of five wounds, and tells her legend has it that "when Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross, some drops of blood from his wounds fell on this plant. Hence the name. Someday I shall tell you more about the legend." This is the brink, but A.B. Rotor is too skillful to go over it. Like his classic "Zita," whose inner structure is the most ordinary of love stories, "The Orchid of Five Wounds" is woven with too much complexity to be merely fragile and tenuous fabric. There is the conflict, for instance, more implied than expressed, between the feelings of the man as physician and the physician as man. As physician he tries to rationalize:

What physician could remain absolutely objective towards a sixteen-year old girl, an orphan struck down by an incurable disease in the spring of her life? This is an event which happens to everybody; one is saddled with a crippled dog, or a bird with a broken wing, or an abandoned kitten, and there is nothing to do, but care for the helpless creature, and in the process of feeding it, keeping it warm, speaking to it, develop a certain tenderness and concern for its survival. And the greater the odds, the more desperate the battle against death, the more intense grows the kinship, so that when the battle is finally lost, one weeps in frustration . . . this is the ache that lies outside the therapeutic spectrum of sedatives . . . (p. 22).

But when the blind girl tries to guess his identity, he reacts as a man:

At the first touch of her fingers, Dr. Morales caught his breath. He felt the blood rushing to his face, his pulse racing. He had a strong desire to get up from the chair so that he could take a deep breath . . . (pp. 23-24).

When the girl finally identifies him: "He did not speak, he dared not trust his voice."

In day may be discharged at last and he thinks:

. . . — when would he see her again? . . . He saw her among the plants, talking to them, picking her flowers . . . Roses and maiden-hair fern and orchis like butterflies would be piled around her, their blended perfume drifting out to the yard beyond (p 35).

The underlying passion of the doctor's feelings and the images of the girl in his thoughts clearly establish the strong attraction he feels for her. At this point, the only question seems to be whether or not the doctor and the girl

will get together at last. But there is another conflict foreshadowed earlier in the story. The physician receives a radiogram informing him that the American embassy has approved his visa application. And here is further proof of Rotor's ability to pull off a difficult resolution for he does not force the ending. Rather, as Mr. Reteche in "Zita" tears up a letter to avoid a direct confrontation with reality, Dr. Morales now

. . . lay down on his bed and covered his head with a pillow. But after tossing a few times he got up, resumed his pacing, clenching his fists. Stopping in front of his TV set, he turned it on and caught the last part of an advice about dandruff. For a moment he stared at the screen, feeling intensely irritated. He walked around the room three times, then faced the TV set again and pushed the volume control full blast. Next he went to his record player, put on a record, and finally turned on his radio, also at maximum. Now the small room was filled with an indescribable blare of trumpets against roll of drums, thunder of rock rhythm against screeching commercials and messages. Since nothing could be distinguished nothing made sense. The external din had cancelled the internal turmoil. All inputs had been plugged, nothing could come in, nothing could be understood, no decision need be made.

He lay down now, full length, certain that in the midst of that indescribable confusion, he could relax, maybe doze off (p. 36).

At this point the "Orchid of Five Wounds" ceases to be a mere love story and makes a statement on the absurdity of life. In supreme irony, only by "harmonizing" with that "indescribable confusion" can a human being "relax, maybe doze off." Perhaps that is why there is no resolution; there can be none in a world of disorder.

"The Balibkayan Doctor" is very different from Dr. Morales. He is Dr. Guzman Ramos, an American citizen on a visit to the old country, Diplomat in Urology, owner of a mansion and three cars (one of them a Rolls-Royce) in Maryland, successful, wealthy, married to an American blonde, a multi-millionaire should he convert his dollar assets to local currency. Again the situation is trite. But the irony is sharp yet subtle, contrived to the limits of a *deus ex machina*, yet plausible, inevitable even. For this balibkayan doctor dies in a violent traffic accident, and the immediate reaction is: how ironic! He leaves a life of ease and distinction for a brief visit home and dies in the wreckage of a creaking ambulance in one of the streets of Novaliches. Some might even say he died through the machinations of the gods rather than the natural flow of the story. But that is only the surface irony and the pathetic ending is actually deeply foreshadowed although the foreshadowing is not immediately discernible.

The deeper irony lies in the doctor's own ambivalent feelings, in the duality of his situation, to which his sudden death only serves as a painful exclamation.

ation point. He is carried away by the strong current of memories long past; there is true affection in the way he greeted familiar faces and looked on familiar streets; the reader even sees him as the exile he himself pictures as seeking new arrivals from the homeland, hungrily nibbling at morsels of news from the old country, tearfully controlling his trembling lips as he listens to native love songs. Yet even as he admits that

You may acquire a mansion in an exclusive residential district, you may belong to half a dozen civic and country clubs, you may have an American wife. At sometime or another, you will meet someone, get involved in an accident, or stumble into a place where you find out, sometimes bitterly, that you are indeed an American citizen — second class (pp. 107-108).

the idea of coming back home, giving up all his assets and possessions and practice, he considered "a crazy idea." He considers himself a dunce to think that

. . . the images and reflexes accumulated over the years could ever be buried beneath a layer of acquired life styles. A general law of physiology — what is not used will atrophy — apparently did not apply to certain functions of the mind (p. 115).

Only when he saw the possibility of being able to live in his usual American style did he seem able to make clear plans. His sudden death at this point only serves to sharpen this ironic detail: more than the returning Filipino struck with the symptoms of acute homesickness, the Balikbayan doctor was the typical expatriate drawn to the material comforts of his home in exile. In the end, he is a statistic like any of the numerous patients he had known as bed numbers and diseases: "Filipino," reads the police notebook, "about 50 years old, Male. DOA."

The rest of the eight stories carry their own particular ironic statements, although the satiric intent of some — in particular "Judas Iscariot, M.D." and "The Clinical Trials" — does not have the subtlety of the two stories discussed here, or even of "Santiago's Syndrome," or "The M.D. and the Faith Healer." The fact, however, is that the reader (like this one) who has memories of the unparalleled richness of Rotor's forest images in "The Day They Transferred the Convicts to Davao," or the unrivalled plot structure of "Zita," will still find the touch of the old master in this new collection. And the verdict remains: Rotor is one of the few master conjurers of meaningful imagery, strongly evocative atmosphere, and strong, steady plot build-up.

One must mention that this collection comes at a time when knowledgeable critics have pronounced the death of Philippine literature in English in convincing tones. To such prophets one can now say: consider *The Men Who Play God*.

Nenita O. Escasa