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## Some Notes on a Philippine Novel

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On the way home, Dr. Lazaro ridicules Tony's piety and credulity. But his affection for his son is revived, and he realizes that "for such things as love, there is only so much time."

"The Light and the Shadow of Leaves" is a retrospective story, showing how the values of the previous generation are often forgotten by the next.

Among the best stories in the collection are two about young women—unsullied innocence in one case, sullied, or at least tempted in the other. Both stories are a good picture of present-day Manila. One is called "The Rain," a picture of idealistic youth: a good young woman who dreams vaguely of love, and a good young man who dreams vaguely of great deeds. The other is called "The Strangers." It is about Manila's rush hour, the snarled traffic on Quezon Boulevard, the crowded buses, the overflowing church of Quiapo, the numbness that comes to a woman who has something to regret, and how the grace of God—for it must be the grace of God though it is not called that—penetrates even the numbness. There is more than a touch of symbolism in both stories—the rain and the dream in one case, Quiapo's rush hour in the other. These two stories show Brillantes at his best. He is a young writer who believes in the goodness of youth. He recognizes the evil in people but believes in their basic sanity. Above all, he believes in divine grace. There is a supernatural dimension to his stories, no less real for being unnamed.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

### *Some Notes on a Philippine Novel*

Several months ago, in Brentano's in New York City, I picked up a copy of a short novel by Emigdio Alvarez Enriquez.<sup>1</sup> The publisher's blurb described it as "a love story of the Philippines". The publication of this novel by an author who may be considered one of the bright lights of the

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<sup>1</sup>THE DEVIL FLOWER. New York, Hill and Wang, 1959.

Philippine literary scene gives me the occasion for expressing a number of things which I have felt for a long time should be said about the questionable present and the hopeful future of the Philippine novel, and of Philippine literature in general. I would like to discuss certain aspects of *THE DEVIL FLOWER* and then draw some conclusions. In all this I am well aware of the dangers of hasty generalizations, yet I feel that Enriquez's novel is typical enough of much current writing in the Philippines to serve as a springboard for some remarks on contemporary Philippine writing in English.

I don't think that there is anyone who seriously doubts that there definitely is a future for Philippine literature, and that writers like Enriquez are destined to play an important role in that future. Philippine literature in English is still young, but the quantity and the caliber of the writing being done by Enriquez and his colleagues gives solid grounds to hope that as these young writers mature in the practice of their craft Philippine literature will grow along with them.

*THE DEVIL FLOWER*, I think, can legitimately be called a Philippine novel in theme as well as in treatment. The main story line portrays the perennial conflict of the new and the old, reflected on several different levels. Ercelia Fernandez who is unfortunately as motive-less and unrealistic a heroine as one can find, is born in a small coastal town in Mindanao, and like many a *barrio* lass before her she goes off to Manila; to the big city, to complete her studies. When she returns home as the town's school teacher she has to face the conflicts that her newer ways and more modern ideas stir up in the narrow confines of a town that still lives in the past. On a second level, there is the conflict of what Enriquez chooses to characterize as a superstitious, outmoded Catholicism and the modern ways of freedom and progress. The author's carabao cart, *nipa* hut and moro *vinta* atmosphere is authentic, and he has some startlingly sharp characterizations of what might be called the stock characters of Filipino *barrio* literature. Enriquez is at home with the folklore and myth of his native Zamboanga and his pages are full of references to the erotic power of *gayuma*, the horse-faced *talajiangs* and the tale of the *ku-*

*lingtangan*. Although Enriquez's use of them might sometimes be excessive and pointless, these are all good things—and they are genuinely Filipino.

But the novel also suffers from a certain number of faults. There are three in particular that I would like to discuss. These are a tendency to "over-write" in what might be called a baroque style, an insufficient grasp of idiomatic English, and what I have called Davenport's Disease—a questionable eagerness to imitate "modern" writers which leads to an excessive preoccupation with sex and several abortive attempts to write in the framework of symbols.

The first failing in Enriquez's novel is a tendency to over-write. Probably the best single adjective that can be used to describe his style is "lush". It is an adjective that has been used of Nick Joaquin at times, and it is equally applicable to Teodoro Locsin and to most of the short stories that are being printed these days in *THE FREE PRESS* and the magazine sections of the Manila papers. Enriquez's writing is flowery, his images are rich and flamboyant. His heroine, Ercelia, is "like a virgin pearl in a native shell, a pearl of the Orient sea", and she has "the seeds of sunshine buried in her cheeks". But "Don Miguel had already dropped a pebble in the placid pool of her imagination and crystal rings were forming in her eyes, catching dreams of many colors". The eyes of the children Ercelia teaches in school were "like water drops running along her back, making her shiver".

The love letters Ercelia receives are pathetic: "I love you with your fragrant boughs and your dews, with the treble of bird songs in your throat and the harvest dance in your steps". And the description of her death is almost painful: "The voice of whirlwinds was in her ears as she bore the brunt of the fire raining on her flesh—and her body gathered salves and ointments from the everness and the allness of their being together. Rain and sweetness commingled in her soul like poetry and song . . . . There was oblivion—there was nothingness, as condensing into dew, she began to fall drop by drop, bead by bead, into the thirsty mouth of death."

Such writing used to be called sophomoric. It is the kind of writing in which every noun must be modified by an adjective, where Filipino children always have sensitive brown faces and small black eyes and Moro *vintas* are always like the sunset. Most writers in their youth pass through this stage when they feel that vividness is *always* achieved by an abundance of detail, that bright colors and strong smells make for strong writing. They do—on occasion—but riches piled knee-high and overflowing soon begin to cloy by their very abundance. After five or six pages of writing like this, the reader has to come up for air lest he be smothered by the richness of the jungle foliage.

It is unfair, I imagine, to characterize all Filipino writing in English as sophomoric. But one must admit that a good deal of contemporary Filipino writing does suffer from a lushness and an overabundance of detailed description. This is not at all surprising when one remembers that English writing in the Philippines is a second-language literature, and that the influences of Spanish and the native tongues are still strong. A very wise teacher once remarked that it is far easier to discipline a strong imagination than to create one where none exists.

Passing to the second point of criticism of *THE DEVIL FLOWER*, it is evident from even a cursory reading of the novel that Enriquez is not yet fully at home in the English language. He is largely correct grammatically, but he often fumbles for the proper idiom. He writes phrases like: "she did not pry the lid of her reserve", and "he delivered Ercelia her diploma in public". Or he says that they left "Ercelia alone with her thinking" and that "the river had lifted out of its bed during the night, flooding the lowlands". These are only a few of many similar passages that might be quoted. Enriquez has not yet learned to write idiomatically in English. This, of course, raises the very interesting problem of whether Filipino writers in English *should* write English as the Americans or English do, or whether they might not legitimately be allowed to write English as it is spoken in the Philippines in many local-

ities. That is a problem I would prefer to leave untouched for the present.

Despite the genuine Philippine background and characters of his novel, however, Enriquez's *DEVIL FLOWER* is, in a very unfortunate sense, decidedly un-Filipino. For with so many riches at his disposal, and with so much still to be done within the framework of the genuinely authentic Filipino tradition, Enriquez has insisted upon being "modern" and "realistic". I am almost tempted to call his writing "American", but that would be an unfair and too universal condemnation of much excellent writing being done in the United States today. It should be obvious that I use the terms "modern" and "realistic" and "American" in a derogatory sense to include almost all the failings that John Davenport in the *LONDON OBSERVER* has listed as symptoms of poor writing in many American novels: "... logorrhea, distention of the material, with elephantiasis of the form, followed by delusions of philosophic grandeur. The action of the syntax is impaired, and pornography is sometimes present."

*THE DEVIL FLOWER* suffers from an acute case of Davenport's Disease. For like many a young writer before him, Enriquez has imitated the popular writers of the day, and these have been mostly Americans. But Enriquez has failed to discriminate between the good and the bad in his models. His two most obvious failures in this regard are his insistence upon ornamenting his story with unnecessary sex, and his efforts to raise the story to a level of philosophic greatness through misplaced symbolism.

A "realistic" approach to sex seems to be an assurance that a novel nowadays will be a candidate for the Best Seller lists. Sex may be tolerated in a novel when it is essential to the plot, when the description is handled with a certain amount of mature restraint, and when it is obvious that the author does not approve of the evil involved, or describe it in such an appealing way as to be an occasion of sin for the mature reader. But when sex has little to do with the progress of the plot or when it is described with an almost adolescent insistence

upon vivid detail, it is no longer literature. It has degenerated to sensational journalism or pornography.

There is, unfortunately, a good deal of unnecessary sex in *THE DEVIL FLOWER*, and there are at least two passages that are positively offensive. The neurotic overtones of the first of these passages add nothing whatsoever to the reasonableness of the characters. Indeed, if we are to accept Enriquez's characterization as valid, and if his heroine's preoccupation with sex and her masochistic tendencies are clinically verifiable, the poor girl should be in an institution! It may well be difficult to determine with any degree of certainty whether Enriquez writes of such deviations with approval and proposes them as valid norms of conduct, but the very ambiguity of his position, especially since it is not demanded by any exigencies of the plot, is tantamount to approval and must be condemned as such.

Enriquez has also made some rather feeble attempts at symbolistic writing, but these efforts have not met with much success. The symbol of the devil flower is not at all clear, and the Maria Clara images have even less meaning, especially in view of the unreal way Enriquez has characterized his heroine. The mirror symbols and many of the more extended symbol-metaphors add nothing to the plot at all. They are useless ornaments on a tree that is already over decorated.

Good symbolism is never strained. It grows almost unconsciously out of the fusion of character, action and treatment. Symbolism is, however, a peculiarly difficult medium to work in and most writers achieve mastery of it only after long years of effort. The trouble with Enriquez's symbolism is that it stumbles and falters for want of a solid foundation.

Father Bernad had some very perceptive comments on an earlier story of Enriquez, "The Doll," which won third place in the *FREE PRESS* Short Story contest for 1952. (*PHILIPPINE STUDIES*, Vol. I, No. 1). At that time, Father Bernad called attention to Enriquez's clumsy handling of the theme, his emphasis on sex, and his poor character portrayal. The faults which Father Bernad clearly pointed out seven years ago are still there.

It is unfortunate that there has been little change in Enriquez's writing since that time. For there certainly is poor plot structure, a good deal of unrealistic character portrayal and useless sex, as well as a fair amount of tedious writing in *THE DEVIL FLOWER* as well as in "The Doll". Both stories suffer from a bad case of adolescent growing pains. But even growing pains merit a certain amount of praise when they give promise of the maturity to come.

Enriquez's background is typical in many ways of the young generation of writers that is growing up on the Philippine scene at present. He came to the United States on a Fullbright grant and on an International scholarship from the University of Iowa. *THE DEVIL FLOWER* was written at the Waddo Foundation in Saratoga Springs, at the Writer's Workshop of the State University of Iowa and at the Huntingdon Hartford Foundation. Enriquez later attended the University of Madrid on a Spanish Government scholarship and with a grant from the Zóbel de Ayala family. These scholarships and grants are the reward of talent and hard work, without a doubt, but one often wonders whether a truly great novel can come out of such comfortable surroundings as a Writer's Workshop. Human nature is seldom waiting for the writer on the doorstep of a university workshop. As a result, novels that are born in writer's workshops and on university grants are all too often artificial and make believe.

It is perhaps unfair to criticize Enriquez for his background and training. Everyone will admit that even writers must eat on occasion. It is our fervent hope that when the principles of the Writer's Workshops become tempered with the heartaches and beauties of real life, we will discover more mature writing coming from the pen of Enriquez and writers like him in the Philippines.

Some years ago in *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* (Vol. I, No. 2) Father Furay described the writing of Nick Joaquin as having power and elements of greatness. I hesitate to compare Enriquez with Nick Joaquin—such a comparison would be unfair to both of them—but I do think that the same phrase can be used with some validity to describe the writing of Emigdio Enriquez.



THE DEVIL FLOWER has many faults. There is much that is mediocre in it, and much that is bad. But there are also passages of competent writing and some flashes of genuine insight. Above all, there is enthusiasm and determination here. One cannot help but be reminded of the early works of many truly great writers which had almost as many faults as virtues. One is not surprised to discover these faults in a young writer. But one does expect a great writer to outgrow the faults.

## II

From THE DEVIL FLOWER and from Enriquez's efforts at self-expression, I believe that we can draw two legitimate characteristics or notes which should be the guideposts of the Philippine novel of the future. The first characteristic must be the dominance and importance of what we may call the Barrio-City theme, although the theme is much wider in its implications than those two words would seem to indicate. Enriquez has used this theme as the main idea of his novel, as we mentioned above, and he has explored its possibilities on several different levels. The conflicts which are inevitable in the meeting of barrio and city are destined to play a large part in the Philippines and in Philippine literature of the future. These conflicts, great and small, are part of everyday Philippine living, and have their counterparts on the national as well as the international scene. I feel confident that Filipino writers will come to realize more and more the rich possibilities in this theme and in this fundamental tension which lies at the very heart of the Philippines today.

On another level, and expressed in a slightly different way, the Barrio-City theme must necessarily find expression in the conflict of the Old and the New. The traditional customs of a nation that has grown strong on a diversity of cultural backgrounds, and the efforts of that culture to change, to adapt and modify itself to meet the demands of an everchanging modern world—this is the basic conflict that is the raw material of potentially great literature. One thinks immediately of recent novels like Hersey's *A SINGLE PEBBLE* and Paton's *TOO LATE* *THE PHALAROPE* and *CRY THE BELOVED COUNTRY*. This same

conflict is the essential drama of Philippine life which is reflected in a hundred different ways each day. It is precisely here that the Filipino writer must find his tragedy and his comedy.

The Filipino writer does not have to import his themes. They are right here in the Philippines if he opens his eyes and looks. Enriquez realized that in *THE DEVIL FLOWER*. It is only in his handling of the theme's immense possibilities that he has fallen short.

The second characteristic note of Philippine literature must be nationalism. But it must be nationalism only in the truest and best sense of the word—the reflection of the Philippines exactly as she is and as she has been over the centuries of her existence. This nationalism in literature must of necessity go back to the Malayan, Spanish and American elements in Philippine culture. It must recognize the contributions to her culture from China, from India and from the other countries of the East. It must investigate the riches of these backgrounds and be a true reflection of the fusion of these elements in the market place of the Philippines today. Philippine nationalism must take cognizance of the place of Catholicism in the Philippines, and it must be steeped in Philippine myth and folklore. For all of these things *are* the Philippines—they are the nation and they are the people. Literature in the Philippines will never be truly and genuinely nationalistic when it denies elements that belong in the makeup of the modern Filipino, nor when it assumes qualities and characteristics, or attitudes that are foreign to the Philippines. Enriquez himself made the same point when he wrote of his heroine as the Maria Clara image: "The people needed to see something tangible—something of themselves—to link the ideal past with the realistic present, to assure them that the new culture setting in was not destroying but supplementing the old".

Perhaps I am spelling out the obvious, but Philippine literature must be *Filipino* and in the true Philippine tradition. Filipinism, in its best sense, is never going to be found by imitating the ephemeral elements of American novels. Imitation is to be desired, of course. It has been the forming discipline of many

a great writer in the past and will be again in the future. But the writer must never stoop to imitation merely for its own sake. He must be mature and discriminating. What is good in American novels will always be good in any novel—Japanese or Indian or Filipino—because what is good in a novel will be based ultimately upon human nature, and that always remains the same. There is much good of this type in American novels and much that can be imitated, but the accidental trappings of modern Americanism will never sit right in any novel that proposes to be truly Filipino.

These are two of the more basic qualities that must, in my opinion, characterize the truly great Filipino novel. Proceeding one step further, it seems to me that Filipino writers at the present time need two things if they are ever to achieve that truly great Filipino novel. They need discipline, first of all, and then they need originality. They need the kind of discipline that makes for clear, correct and precise writing. N.V.M. Gonzalez has often spoken of the need for craftsmanship in Philippine writers, and Professor Yabes has written in many places of the need for competent writing. I take it that both these critics mean the same thing as I do when I say that the young Filipino writer needs discipline. A writer must be in full command of his tools before he can undertake any great work of art, and this competency or craftsmanship or discipline in his writing can come only after long years of persistent and *accurate* training. The trouble with most young writers in the Philippines is that they are reluctant to spend the time necessary on this type of apprenticeship. They want to fly before they have learned to walk.

The second great need of Filipino writers is for originality. I have already indicated how this can be achieved by abandoning the indiscriminate imitation of modern American and European novelists, and turning to the themes that are inherent in the traditional Philippine culture. Discipline and competent writing alone may result in *good* novels. But when the discipline of the skilled writer is added to the individual writer's genius and a willingness to break away from the stereotyped attitudes of the majority of modern novelists and to make an at-

tempt at genuine originality in theme and in treatment, the result will be *great* novels—great Filipino novels.

Emigdio Enriquez and most of his young contemporaries on the writing scene do not yet have either of these two qualities of discipline and originality. They have the barest elements of discipline and originality and the promise of greater things to come, but that is all. Enriquez is young yet, however, as is Philippine literature in English. We can hope that in the years to come, Enriquez's imagination and richness, and his admitted skill with words will be added to the necessary qualities of discipline and originality. If they are, we can look forward eagerly to great things from him and from others of his breed—the young writers of the Philippines who may or may not be tomorrow's geniuses.

For the future of Philippine literature is in the hands of writers like Enriquez and his colleagues. They are young, and that is good, because it means that we have much to look forward to. The potential of their writing is evident in novels like *THE DEVIL FLOWER*. There is imagination and richness here. When this richness becomes tempered by discipline, and when this imagination finds its roots in a truly characteristic background, and no longer seeks its models in the sex themes and Freudian symbolism of modern American novelists, we shall have the beginnings of a great Philippine literature.

JOSEPH A. GALDON