

# philippine studies

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

---

## **The Failure of the Romantic Sensibility: La Via: A Spiritual Journey**

Review Author: Emmanuel Torres

*Philippine Studies* vol. 7, no. 4 (1959): 511–518

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Dominican Bishop Salazar is said to have arrived in 1851. Note 64 on p. 90 should read *conscientious* instead of *consensus* objectors.

The purpose of this reference work could be achieved with less lengthy quotations in some instances. A certain amount of overlapping and repetition is also apparent. One might question the appositeness of the quotation from Murray apropos the president's reading of the act of consecration. The brief history of marriage legislation is repeated almost word for word within a few pages. Questions touching marriages are also found in a previous chapter.

A future edition would be considerably enhanced by the addition of a bibliography broken up to match the chapter headings and including not only books but articles and pertinent law cases as well. As it stands they tend to become lost in a whirl of footnotes, and a table of law cases standing alone tells the non-jurist very little. Despite some carelessness in details, this is a book which has and will continue to have value. It has set forth in bold outline the many-faceted relationship that has grown up in the course of time between Church and State in the Philippines. No doubt it should and will find a warm welcome on the reference shelf of administrators both civil and ecclesiastical.

SAMUEL R. WILEY

## THE FAILURE OF THE ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY

LA VIA: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY. By Ricaredo Demetillo. Introduction by Leopoldo Y. Yabes. Preface by Ricaredo Demetillo. Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1959. ix, 121p.

*La Via: A Spiritual Journey*, the second volume of poems by Ricaredo Demetillo, is an ambitious work described in the introduction by Professor Leopoldo Y. Yabes of the University of the Philippines as "the most sustained argument in verse, and also the most serious work, ever attempted by a Filipino poet in the English language". Demetillo himself has written a preface explaining the central thesis of LA VIA, which is that the Church is not the true way to ultimate happiness because it make "an unnecessary cleavage between the body and the spirit". Rejecting "the Christian religion, in its institutional form", the poet propounds another way of life, a cult which regards self-knowledge as the end of existence and a subjective romantic-love ethic as a necessary condition for realization of that end.

This thesis in its negative part is not argued so much as asserted. The Church's true position on the body-soul dichotomy is misunderstood; such bolstering illustrations as (in Yabes's concurring introduction) the idea that "the spiritual bliss attained by the poet in the

*Divina Commedia* was based on an earthly love" are literarily arguable, to say the least. To deal with all this at length one would have to go deep into the Church's philosophy and theology and into the facts of history and into an assessment of values in the *Divina Commedia* — all matters beyond the scope of this review. We shall, rather, confine ourselves to consideration of the poem as poem, making only such side-excursions into the personal philosophy of the poet as the reading calls for.

*La Via* is divided into three Books, each Book representing a phase of the "spiritual journey". These Books, however, do not come off as a satisfactory whole: there is no unifying controlling metaphor or symbol bringing parts organically together and consistently producing thematic wholes, as in Eliot's *Waste Land*; no fluent dramatic narrative or allegory capable of developing poetic ideas, as in the *Divina Commedia*; no suitable literary convention to sustain stretches of verse argument, as in Auden's *Age of Anxiety*. *La Via*, like the Eliot and Auden poems, deals with the same material: the exploration of the modern chaos, followed by diagnosis and prescription. But that material is nothing without significant form.

Eliot tackles the problem of form by creating a texture of closely related literary and moral allusions and symbolic *leitmotifs*, dramatically balanced and musically modulated; Auden by refurbishing a tight classic convention (the pastoral eclogue) capable of sustaining comment and parody, wit and subtle irony, and giving these sharp epigrammatic point. But the author of *La Via* does not quite triumph in the task of giving organic coherence to his material; the poems are yoked together, anthology-fashion, by the theme of the journey which is explicitly announced in the title, announced in the author's preface, announced in the prose preamble provided before each Book, and now and then announced in such opening lines as "We had not known the way this far extended", "This is the journey thought the dark woods", etc. Occasionally various aspects of the journey are brought forth by allusions. Yet, generally speaking, the reader moves from one numbered poem to the next without a strong sense of thematic development, variation, heightening, and modulation; what he does get is a rhetorical patchwork of clear-cut multi-colored impressions and vignettes.

Book One, entitled "Dissonances", shows the confusion of modern civilization. References to actual people, places, and things of topical interest abound, giving a jazzy surface of authenticity to Demetillo's urban waste land. But he shows us too much of it, in a theatrically gaudy light, and the enumeration of vices and vulgarities has a mere quantitative effect. With a few exceptions, the poems seldom rise above plain reportorial statement and often dissipate their angry message by overstressing the obvious or by crude parody.

Won't we look grand in a Cadillac  
Or, taking air, in a new Jaguar?  
Won't we feel VIP with a big cigar  
Stuck in the mouth or when we sip cognac,  
Won't it feel nice to know that we  
Have given jobs to this or that *compadre*...

Another poem begins:

So we are sick. The diagnosis makes this clear.  
The literary doctors sadly shake their heads.  
The list of casualties is quite impressive.

Political avarice, cupidity, adultery, philistinism, suicide — the poet parades them all, hugger-mugger. It is interesting to note that the evils Demetillo rants against are quite commonly the ones which anybody with a moral conscience and in his right mind would condemn, and that there is nothing new in the manner in which Demetillo exposes these evils in glossy naturalistic snapshots. The complete absence of humor, real wit or irony, makes his images of disease and corruption resemble purplish papiermaché objects for simple caricature, lampoon, or bathos.

Sweeping condemnation in verses that rasp with righteous indignation and very little else shows that there is no real aesthetic distance between the poet's sensibility and subject. Demetillo sees practically nothing worth saving among his city-dwellers. Unlike Catholic artists Baudelaire and Rouault, he sees the evils of this age in such stark actualities that he is unable to condemn the sin while reserving just a bit of compassion for the sinner. The method of irony, by which the poet sees his subject from as many points of view as the occasion of the poem allows, could have made Demetillo's rage a little more humanly tolerant and saved it from being raw. The "list of casualties" very soon loses its immediacy and point and begins to bore the reader, who could have imagined for himself three-fourths of the casualty list. Relevance could have been kept, had the poet resorted now and then to more suggestive, subtle means of irony and wit.

The effects become often wholly illustrative or rhetorical ones, as in the following poem, the final one in the Book of "Dissonances":

'Twas said in ages past, Iduna fed  
Gods with apples grown from a certain tree.  
The fruits conferred them immortality.  
But then a curse appeared. Iduna fled  
And near the tree, a frowning spire was reared.

This was the tree that once in Eden grew  
When Adam walked with Eve to pluck and eat  
And all of nature thrilled in jubilee.

But malice serpentine spat its obloquy  
And Eden shriveled up. Poor Adam fled.

Pursued by guilt, out of that innocence,  
Young Adam fled. Pale Eve was by his side.  
The serpent followed them and mocked their thighs.  
And discord flared to hate between those two.  
Gone was the paradise that they had shared.

Remove the externals of meter and you have something approaching the cliché. The poem as such hardly says anything particularly significant by way of insight (except, perhaps, where it juxtaposes Iduna's tree with the Biblical one) and the language is barely imaginative; the poem is at least a stanza too long. Yet it serves a purpose: however dull the form, the idea is important to the whole design of *La Via*, for here the poet is telling us that there is a lost state of innocence to which we must return. It is a kind of transition-piece to the next Book.

Book Two, entitled "Not There, Not There", describes how the poet ventures to regain that lost state of innocence. Guilt-ridden, the poet tries to get away from the limbo of the modern city and seeks for some means to bring order to his life. In the preamble we read that, for the poet, "the Church no longer is an adequate place of refuge for the troubled and burdened, because to them it is overly stern, unsympathetic, negative and unloving". Here, as in the previous Book, far too many poems are spoiled by lack of compression, rhythmic control, and suggestiveness. Blunt didacticisms flourish in graceless exuberance.

So-called ideals now divide  
Body and soul in a war that knows,  
For Christians, no respite or truce.  
What if the prurience of our day  
And all the violence:  
That in the news and magazines,  
That in the books, the ads and such,  
May be the symptoms that the sins  
We try so hard to smother, bray  
Like asses in a church?

The Church is always the big black wolf, or rather the scapegoat, and the poet makes manifest his *Non serviam*. The shrill impatience with which he blames the Church for a miscellany of the world's ills borders on the fantastic; it betrays at least a lack of tolerance, at most a failure to grasp the inner realities of the Church. The absolutism of Demetillo's rejection of the Church is matched only by the absolutism of his rage against the modern city. His criticism

of the Church sounds more like that of a petulant outsider who judges from appearances and personal impressions than that of someone who has been inside and knows. His criticism, therefore, carries little intellectual weight. Also there is something suspect about the aggressiveness of such passages as the following:

This is the sabbath.    Observant, I notice  
Doors open at Stephen's, that the flock,  
Starchy or nyloned, may lap beatitude,  
Sipping Christ's blood, the apportioned food  
That made the ancients lean but moderns fat.  
They bleat loud praises to an unctuous god:  
Such is the virtue of the present stock.  
Brewer of tempests in a tea-cup age,  
I tramp time here, feeling correctness lames  
In those who plan tomorrow like a meal,  
I cannot peg life for a spurious grail,  
And sabbaths cannot calm my tempest's rage.  
Pressed to the barbed fence near the church,  
                  a frail  
Waif stares at the proud heels of the pious  
                  dames.

Demetillo can hardly contain his choking vehemence, would have been quite unbearable if not for the fine metrical rightness of the stanzas. Therein lies the weakness of *La Via*'s "argument": issues are resolved in black and white, in overstatements and labels ("*lap* beatitude", "*bleat loud* praises to an *unctuous* god", "*spurious* grail", "*sabbaths cannot calm my tempest's rage*"), and critical points driven home with the unrelenting force of a steamroller. All this emotional rage is supposedly made poignant by the heavy-handed "soap-opera" sentimentalism of the frail waif, pressed to the *barbed wire near the church* (!), looking at the pious dames.

At the end of Book Two, in the last poem, the poet "arrives at the original innocence". That innocence, piping with Blake-like associations, is not really arrived at by legitimate means as something truly earned in the poem itself; it just *happens*, revelation takes place, the poet "arrives at the original innocence". After stumbling here and there in the labyrinthine ways of his own mind, passing by psychic thorn-thickets and gaping traumatic abysses, the poet finally feels "a mercy not of men", beyond reason, and he regains innocence. All this is described in facile Shelleyan language—or is it Wordsworthian?—"rush of sudden wings", "marvel to men's sense", "flaming with glory all natural and human things".

The reader who has been patient all along with Demetillo's argumentation will find it difficult to follow him any further, for his solution, his "arrival", is a purely gratuitous event, a private affair

of the heart, a literary sleight of hand. This supports the growing conviction that, contrary to Professor Yabes's introduction, LA VIA has no real *argument* as such, no visible intellectual structure to support the poet's images and emotional fancies (a structure like that of the *Divina Commedia* or *The Waste Land* which the reader can openly examine for its intrinsic worth), much less a body of objective truths to give specificity and authority to the poet's romantic sensibility. LA VIA's "argument" is no more than a mass of sheer emotional attitudinizings and highly charged sensate responses, propped up by the scaffoldings of a doubtful rhetoric. Nowhere does Demetillo make an effort to wrestle with the basic tenets of his adversary on solid ground; he bypasses them. The *true way*, which is provided by Nature, simply appears "*ex machina*" on the scene. Nature in its pure state (here, there are echoes of Jean Jacques Rousseau) offers its consolations to the bewildered poet, *and the thing happens*, the poet feels his oneness with all natural and human things, the grace of innocence descends. This is all very well, but so far all we have is the poet's word that this is a fair and valid resolution to, and not an evasion of, the problems raised by his "argument".

The third Book, entitled "Harmonies," describes the poet's new found joy on earth; and here the reader has a chance of seeing what the precise nature of Demetillo's state of innocence is. He burst into rhapsodies in the name of the "sanative mysteries" of sex which make possible his self-identification with "the creative forces of the universe", with the light of the sun, the growing grain, the running rills, the fertile womb, life itself radiant with health. Demetillo presents a love ethic which is consciously sex-centered and endowed with overtones of D. H. Lawrence's "blood knowledge". It is interesting to note that Demetillo, after being so impatient with anything alien that smacks of dogma, is dogmatic all along in his own assertions of what the good life ought to be: "What is the mode of perception that more than any other in our time seems most fitted to achieve a confrontation of our human situation in relation to the psyche? My answer is: that which is provided by depth psychology..." (Author's preface, p. v). And this psychology, according to Demetillo, teaches that sex is "the amative bath to invigorate the human psyche, a reservoir which can last almost indefinitely unless its sources are dammed up by fears and guilts." (Author's preface, p. viii).

LA VIA worships life-in-sex as an end in itself, all-aglow with the naive optimism of a naturalistic philosophy and with its own subjective mystic rites. For Demetillo tries hard to elevate his cult of life-in-sex from the simply physical to a spiritual plane. He does this by a "mystical" approach, similar to that of Dylan Thomas who also believes in the vital forces of sex. It is a "mystic" approach induced by words, by sheer linguistic manipulation, by private incantation that brings about "spiritual states." Like Thomas, to whom he owes much

in technique and diction, Demetillo has the capacity to mesmerize attention by sweeping gusts of imagery of such verbal splendor that the reader is persuaded to fancy that there is a firm bedrock of objectively valid truths and authoritative thought behind the language; there is none. Like Thomas, Demetillo can certainly manipulate the English language magnificently ("The sensual fire that holyghosts my bone Tongues through the ash of my dissolving years", "cherubims choired in a cloud", "Daily I sail the harbor of your hand"), but a decade and a half of Dylan Thomists has made such whirlwinding a flamboyantly mannered exercise that no longer impresses. Like Thomas, Demetillo has facility in bending any objective or historical value to suit his own personal symbology or frame of values. As a matter of fact, Demetillo seems willing enough to accept any set of objective values, laws or revealed truths whatever, but only on his own terms. Thus he wrests such nomenclature as the Paraclete, Moses, and Orphism to his own ends. Romantic sensibility and eclecticism, it is true, seem to be lovers made for each other. But both can be annoying to the reader.

In poem after poem, one keeps hearing the poet insist that the self, his own, is the measure of all things and that spiritual bliss is arrived at by his own natural powers, all delivered in a tone that, to this reviewer, suggests a defence mechanism of some kind beneath the superficialities of hard metaphysical conceit ("I, scholar of the institute of pain, Have learned the law of harmony"; "I create my universe that dull, dazed eyes May sense new marvels and then kneel to praise"; "...I, new Adam, wander in a grove... I grow into self-knowledge, which is truth"; "How the dove gyres around my marrowed fire To which I'm votary and priest to chant"). The first person singular sticks out all over the place like a bleeding thumb. He invokes God, but the God invoked remains an unrelentingly subjective one. The intensity of the self-consciousness is only surpassed by the sentimental naiveté which spills about in soft, cloying words and rhythms:

Now in the liberty that makes me free  
I walk the paths and hear the orioles call  
Their golden call above a coconut tree  
And hear the dalawidaw's waterfall  
Stream silverly to lap my luxuriant soul.

The exuberance of the life of paradise regained finds correspondence in such rhetorical redundancy as "in the liberty that makes me free". Behind that vision of the blessed state we hear the rococo voice of Rousseau: Man in a state of nature is good, only society and institutions corrupt.

"Man's sources of idealism lie wholly within himself," Demetillo tells us. "He cannot set up external standards or ideals... for in



ideals, as in shoes, what will fit one will even cripple another." This seems to be LA VIA's final message; that there can be no frame of values worth bothering about outside the self. But then to suggest that there should be only an anarchy of individuals creating and holding on to their own individual values is no way to remedy the moral and social evils that Demetillo condemns.

Idealism which does not go beyond the self is a contradiction in terms; it cancels itself out in the long run because it violates a strong inclination in the human personality to communicate with others and, if the idealism is intrinsically good, to further effect "a change of heart" in others. Idealism, of its nature, seeks to externalize itself and to seek for extra-personal sanction. Otherwise the term is a vague glorious mirage or a purely egotistic and sterile value. Demetillo's concept of personal idealism disparages the possibility of the intellect to discover and ascertain the intrinsic good and universal worth of ideals and standards outside the self. To maintain such a concept is to question the basic need in man as a social and moral being to seek and uphold external norms for human conduct in the attainment of happiness. LA VIA's message, however, is not without its own peculiar attractions to certain of the "enlightened" intelligentsia who would impale reason on the thorn of emotional arrogance in justifying, if only to themselves, the pursuit of personal comforts or of some private caprice or myth. Such a position simplifies life too much and evades universal issues gratuitously by self-made tenets arrived at too easily.

The purely subjective side of man acquires meaning only as it is dynamically related and reconciled to that other side which seeks an external body of truths and sanctions. This is the classic view. It is opposed to the romantic which regards human nature as self-sufficient, independent of objective truths and sanctions, "an infinite reservoir of possibilities", as T. E. Hulme puts it in his essay on romanticism and classicism. Demetillo inclines to the romantic view as defined by Hulme, with Freudian modifications. Demetillo has this to say in his preface: "Thanks to the discoveries of the psychologists, we have begun to see authoritatively that nature herself has set up sex as the amative bath to invigorate this human psyche, a reservoir which can last almost indefinitely..." The classic view, however, has always been that man is intrinsically limited, a bucket rather than an inexhaustible well. It is by awareness of this limitation and the attendant need to respect objective order and tradition that man is able to realize the fulness of his psychic powers through discipline and not dissipate them in an tepid bath of emotions that can only lead to narcissistic euphoria and spiritual smugness.