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Major and Minor Keys, by Demetillo

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Book Reviews

MAJOR AND MINOR KEYS. By Ricaredo D. Demetillo. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987. 180 pages.

Leopoldo Y. Yabes says that "Ricaredo Demetillo is a central and commanding figure in the field of Philippine writing in English. For over four decades he has devoted most of his efforts to the creation of imaginative writing in English and to its interpretation as a college teacher and writer of criticism." It is fitting praise for a man who has dedicated a lifetime to Philippine letters.

Demetillo has written mostly poetry (*No Certain Weather, Barter in Panay, Daedalus and Other Poems, The Scare-Crow Christ, La Via: A Spiritual Journey, The City and the Thread of Light, Lazarus Troubador* and *Masks and Signatures*). He has also written drama (*The Heart of Emptiness is Black*), a novel (*The Genesis of a Troubled Vision*) and two volumes of critical essays (*The Authentic Voice of Poetry* and *Major and Minor Keys*). Demetillo sums up his own work: "From the rebellion of youth to the dynamic affirmation of life-enhancing values of the mature creative artist is the long way I have traversed in my poems, poetic plays, the novel and literary criticism" (p. 174).

Major and Minor Keys is a collection of sixteen critical essays. Six of them discuss Philippine novelists in English—Nick Joaquin, Bienvenido Santos, Edilberto Tiempo, NVM Gonzalez, Sionil Jose and Edith Tiempo. Five of them concern Philippine poets—Cirilo Bautista, Bienvenido Santos, Filipino poets on Ninoy Aquino, "Mature and Immature Poets" and "The Lyric Poets in Our Midst." Three essays are on more general topics of criticism— "The Mirror of Perseus," "Moral Values in Philippine Literature" and "Tradition and the Filipino Writers." One essay is a critical analysis of Demetillo's own poem "Cophetua, Uncover Your Bride," and a final essay is a review of his own career—"Man of Letters in Academe."

Although a good deal of Demetillo's criticism of the six novelists is plot summary, he does provide a number of insights into the novels. He correctly points out the moral dimensions of Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* "Nick Joaquin . . . has constructed a moral structure that will challenge the thoughts of those of us who look for what is deeply significant in what we read

and contemplate. The novel is not a romantic escape from our problematic reality, but a direct confrontation and criticism of Philippine society, jolting us where we are most vulnerable and destroying our complacencies" (p. 49). But he fails, I think, to understand the deeper implications of moral choice and freedom that Joaquin is proposing in the novel. Nor does he seem to understand the earth-air- fire-water symbolism which Joaquin has placed at the heart of the novel.

Demetillo is less appreciative of NVM Gonzalez. "*The Bamboo Dancers* is not a direct confrontation of Philippine social, moral and political conditions ...unless we read into it present chaotic conditions, two decades and a half after *The Bamboo Dancers* was written and published" (p. 71). "As a work of art, the novel is a failure" (p. 69). Demetillo has missed, I think, the central position of the Lament for Thammuz with which the novel begins. It "seems uncalled for," Demetillo says, "and has no bearing on the main story line of *The Bamboo Dancers*. Certainly it does not have any significance to the events that transpire in Tokyo or Hiroshima or Taipei" (p. 67). On the contrary, the Lament for Thammuz is the central point of the whole novel, and establishes both the central theme and the central symbol.

Demetillo is equally critical of Edith Tiempo's *His Native Coast*. ". . . the novel is escapist and anti-nationalistic" and not "seriously meaningful, except as an interesting romance about two persons whose circumstances are so different that they cannot find fulfillment in marital union" (p. 100). He is more positive in his assessment of Edilberto Tiempo's *To Be Free* ("a major achievement, a masterpiece of its kind" [p. 58]) and Santos's *Villa Magdalena* (" . . . it places Bienvenido N. Santos where he rightly belongs: among the bright hierarchy of lights in Philippine literature" [p. 57]), but both essays are quite short and do not give Demetillo the opportunity to discuss what he considers the merits of the two novels.

Clearly, Demetillo considers Sionil Jose's Rosales Novels (*Tree, The Pretenders, My Brother, My Executioner, Po-on* and *Mass*) among the best in Philippine writing in English. "I contend, soberly and formally, that we have among us the first great Filipino novels written in English" (p. 73). "Alone among the Filipino fictionists, F. Sionil Jose has written terse, truthful words about our beleaguered society *in extremis*; he has spoken the awful truths and grappled with the fearful realities that centrally confront all of us, not in just one novel but at length in four or five books, which, taken together, are the most impressive legacy of any writer to Philippine culture" (p. 86). Demetillo clearly grounds his praise of Sionil Jose in his own critical position when he quotes Solzhenitsyn: "Literature that does not pass on to society its pains and fears, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers, such literature does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a facade. Such a literature loses the confidence of its own people, and its published works are used only as waste paper" (p. 86).

Demetillo's criticism of the novelists here is largely thematic. With the exception of Linda Ty-Casper, he has chosen the most important novelists in Philippine writing in English and thus gives a survey of the field of the novel. He summarizes the novels perceptively and attempts to outline the major themes of the works. But he does not seem to have captured the deeper meaning of the novels in question (*His Native Coast*, for example, or *Villa Magdalena*). This is largely because he has not understood the major mythic symbols at work in many of them, or has misinterpreted the role of important characters (Father Tony, for example, in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*).

There are full-length essays on only two poets in the collection— Cirilo Bautista and Bienvenido Santos. The other essays on poets treat quite briefly a number of other Philippine poets. Demetillo is not impressed by Bautista. "All these . . . testify to a serious lack in the sensibility of Cirilo Bautista. . . . I hope in the future the poet will find it obligatory to reflect the cultural traditions of Filipinos and deal frontally with the Filipino problems that confront all of us in the present day. . . . To do so will vastly improve the poems, add clarity to the symbolic gestures, and to the audience appeal of the poetry. Authenticity, at the least, demands this" (p. 112). In more particular fashion, Demetillo calls "Archipelago" "a very shapeless work and mostly a dull performance" (p. 101).

Demetillo is equally critical of Santos's second volume of poetry, *Distances: In Time*. "There are lyrics . . . that are uncertain and unrealized. The music is not always perfect; and the language is a little too restrained, a little too subdued. . . . There are areas of negative waste, of private references that are puzzling and unsatisfying" (p. 171).

Among the other poets whom he mentions briefly in the collection are Gemino Abad, Alfrredo Navarro Salanga, Ricardo M. de Ungria, Alfred A. Yuson, Leopoldo Max T. Gerardo, Gelacio Y. Guillermo Jr., Federico Licsi Espino Jr. (whom Demetillo calls "one of the better poets of the country" [p. 136]), Emmanuel Torres, Francis C. Macansantos, Herminio Beltran and Simeon Dumdum Jr. It is unfortunate that Demetillo, whose forte is poetry, did not give us longer commentaries on some of these new names in Philippine poetry in English. It would have been a very rewarding exercise.

The book is poorly edited. It is unfortunate that typographical errors, which are so common in Philippine publications, should occur in a volume of literary criticism, or that errors like "Caps and Lower Keys" for Arguilla's "Caps and Lower Case" (p. 31), Blackmore for Blackmur (on the back cover), Gonzales for Gonzalez (p. 31), should creep into the text. There are innumerable typographical errors throughout. These perhaps can be blamed on the proofreaders, but we can only blame Demetillo for saying that Maria's body "exudes the fragrance of papaya blossoms" (p. 31) when Arguilla wrote that she "was fragrant like a morning when papayas are in bloom," or for the many faults in idiom.

Yet these are relatively small blemishes on a volume that is a genuine tribute to a man who has contributed his whole life to the profession of writing criticism.

In Demetillo, the artist still strives "to evoke the emotions and attitudes that make up an intellectual and aesthetic milieu. The imagination of modern man still tries to find the oblique images that enable us, like Perseus, to confront the gorgons of Reality" (p. 27).

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BONGBONG AT KRIS / BATANG PRO. By Bienvenido Noriega, Jr. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987. iv + 235 pages; photographs.

The two plays paired in this third collection of Bienvenido Noriega's plays are, the author admits in his foreword, written very differently from each other: *Batang Pro* is "seryosong-seryoso, matipid, bumubuntal ang diyalogo, napakapanglaw ng pananaw sa tao't ating mundo"; *Bongbong at Kris* is "pantasya, sobrang daldal, binabaligtad at nililibak ang mga sinasagrado nating katotohanan." And yet they share many things: ". . . kapwa tumatalakay ng mga sensitibong isyung panlipunan, parehong may malasakit sa mga tampok nilang tauhan, parehong nakukuha pa ring tumawa sa gitna ng lagim at alinlangan" (iii).

Batang Pro's three characters are Ricky (16), a pimp/cigarette vendor, Nado (12), and Milet (13), both child prostitutes. The play takes them through seven scenes, three years, and a world of hellish experience.

Chilling is the way the children react to disaster. Nado is impressed by a raging fire, and a half-crazed woman trying to rescue her trapped father. He thinks it is a great sight, especially when the wind blows it bigger. Ricky is amused, then leaves to see if he can join the looting.

Callous they seem to be when talking about family: Ricky contemplates giving his three stepsisters (all from different fathers) away to beggars after his mother's death, since he had been supporting them only to help her. Nado mentions that his father had sold him to Mr. Gelber, his *amo*. Adopted, Ricky insists; "hindi ipinagbibili ang tao." "Ganoon na nga siguro," Nado says, and they laugh (p. 11). But he dreams of saving up money to buy his youngest brother from his father.

Casual is the talk of whipping and beating, of abortions and hunger, of money and prostitution:

> MILET: . . . Araw-araw, me tangang tulad ko na susuray-suray diyan at handang sumabak sa kahit ano maitawid lamang ang mga unang araw. 'Tapos, pag sanay na siya sa magaang na trabaho, hindi mo na kailangang buyuhin pa upang magkalat.