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Art and Intellect: Masks and Signature

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Book Reviews

ART AND INTELLECT

MASKS AND SIGNATURE. By Ricaredo Demetillo. Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1968. x, 175 pp.

Much too often the artist has been praised for unrestrained lyricism, as if the value of esthetic experience depended solely on sensual pleasure. An audience seeking relief from the harshness of mundane living encourages this kind of relationship between artist and beholder. In this context, unfortunately, literature and art barely rise above the emotions. Intellectuality becomes suspect.

Reading Demetillo's latest book of poems, *Masks and Signature*, one is properly impressed by the poet's sheer determination to keep art on a high level. Imagination is fused with intellect; *knowing* at once becomes as important as *feeling*.

"The poet orders, purifies," states the author in an opening piece. "His art demands stern discipline." Then he proceeds, with more than ordinary skill, to give life to this credo.

For most poets, indeed, the temptation to surrender thought to form is compelling. The mellifluously coined phrase, though exceedingly slender in meaning, is generally preferred to the apt word which, in Demetillo's terms, "cuts strict like a sword." Eschewing the fluent and easy technique, poet Demetillo attains a lucidity that makes intelligent poetic discourse respectable once more. Thus, in protecting the inhumanity of the social order, the writer remains restrained and candid, even as he censures, in his "Street by Esteros":

Esteros finger the dark street,
Ruffians that shyly grope
To lift the dirty skirts
Of coarse drabs snared by sleep.
Here stars are ashamed to see themselves.

It takes more than a poetic ear to forge words into a poem; it takes also craftsmanship. Demetillo amply proves in *Masks* that he has both. His use of rhyme, while occasionally calling undue attention to the poetic form, only proves his technical dexterity.

In two parts, *Masks and Signature* discourses on the author's concept of the esthetic life (the Way of Art) and the men who in his view have given life to that concept (Witnesses). Here a wide range of personages, from the ancient and remote to the artist-next-door, is presented to the reader. The poet's tribute to Joya, the young Filipino painter, that

Space is a radiance like a summer sky
Where lines swerve surely in the air

is as cogent and sensitive as his statement on the French symbolist, Mallarmé:

The solitude of reed a star brought him
The misty torment of a paved atoll
Art of the delicate heart was not
 what he sought:
He dreamed how sirens plunged
 the wine cup's brim!

Here is a book that the serious student of art will find delightful, because it has something to say. And what it says it says intelligently.

FELIXBERTO C. STA. MARIA

A SENSE OF SYMBOL

SYMBOLS IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION AND THE GEORGICS.

by Francisco Demetrio, S.J., Manila: Ateneo de Manila Publications, Logos 3, 1968. 145 pp.

This little work is the third in a series of publications of the Loyola House of Studies. Happily, it sustains the high quality of the previous publications.

In an age which has been characterized by the loss of a sense of symbol, Fr. Demetrio's work is most timely. In his discussion of the earth as a cosmic symbol and of various rites and sacrifices connected with the earth, he has done a remarkable job of documenting the unity and continuity of man's desire to come to terms with himself and his environment.

The non-believer may well question many of the author's interpretations and conclusions. This, however, does not make them less valid.