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Tarlac and Andromeda: The Stories of Gregorio Brillantes

Miguel A. Bernad

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Review Articles

Tarlac and Andromeda: The Stories of Gregorio Brillantes

I

When Gregorio Brillantes graduated from College in 1953, he won a certain measure of literary recognition almost immediately. In December of that year he received the one-thousand-peso prize in the FREE PRESS short story contest. He won it again in 1954 and again in 1956. In 1957 he received one vote for the first prize in the Palanca Awards and in 1960 he won the second prize.

He brings to the Filipino short story certain qualities not always found in other writers. Like Nick Joaquin he writes with sophistication and elegance, but he writes more soberly, with deeper understanding of personal problems, with a greater fund of hope and with less preoccupation with the past. Like many Filipino writers he writes of provincial life, but not of the primitive life in the hills or the simple joys and sorrows of the rural countryside. His subject is mainly the life of the well-to-do middle classes, those who live in large houses in Manila or in a large provincial town and who enjoy the advantages and face the problems of opulence.

His characters are quite authentic: the physician who has built himself a thriving practice; the lawyer who has risen to

prominence; the public official; and of course their wives, sons, daughters. The men enjoy the prestige that comes with a certain amount of wealth, power and influence. This enviable social position does not always improve their tempers—or their morals. It does not always bring peace of mind. They are in some subtle way estranged from their families—though not outwardly: there are no noisy quarrels—and they are, in an even subtler way, estranged from themselves.

But life is comfortable enough. They are well housed, well fed, well served, well provided with transport. They listen to good music after dinner. The wives play mah-jongg or give lavish parties to celebrate a birthday or a daughter's debut. The sons and daughters go to school in Manila and acquire the manners of the smart set. They love gaiety, noise, speed; they sometimes get into serious trouble; or they manage to keep themselves and their ideals unsullied or at least return to a more sober mind.

Or their families may have been wealthy in the past but now are less opulent. They have grown up in a larger, more comfortable way of life which they now no longer enjoy. The large house in the provincial town still belongs to the family; but the fields may have to be sold if they are to live less shabbily in Manila.

They are all Catholics, brought up in the Faith. Their religion is part of their lives: they go to Mass on Sundays—the late Mass, to be sure. They attend Catholic schools. The priest is invited to their parties, and he is sent for at the hour of death, but his presence is sometimes resented. The outward forms of worship are followed, but there has been an erosion of faith. This may be due to having studied abroad, or to preoccupation with material things, or to some lapses in moral conduct. But faith sometimes comes back either quietly or with a jolt: on a sick call, or after a party, or on the way to a date, when one happens to drop by the Quiapo church. And some of the young men, quite sophisticated but unsullied by the world, think of the priesthood.

II

Brillantes' stories¹ are being collected into a volume which will be published early in 1961 as the second in the series of Contemporary Filipino Literature of which Bienvenido Santos' *BROTHER, MY BROTHER* was the first. The series, published by the Benipayo Press and distributed by the Bookmark, is under the general editorship of N. V. M. Gonzalez. Gregorio Brillantes' volume will be entitled *THE DISTANCE TO ANDROMEDA AND OTHER STORIES*.

The advantage of seeing a collection of stories in page proofs before they are printed and bound is that one can put the stories into any order one wishes. As they lie upon the present writer's disgracefully cluttered desk, they are in three separate piles: the Good, the Very Good, and that larger group of stories which are competently written, probably as studies or exercises, which have served their purpose when published in a weekly magazine. Twelve of the stories are in this pile. The forthcoming book would probably not lose very much if these were omitted.

Among the "Good" is the title story, "The Distance to Andromeda." A boy in Tarlac goes with his friend to see a moving picture. The film depicts a rocket ship that goes beyond the moon, beyond the sun, into the neighboring galaxy of Andromeda so many light-years away. The boy comes out of the theatre and notes the contrast between the romantic world of outer space and the drab world of Tarlac. If we do not class this story among the "Very Good," it is because it is a trifle wordy, and a trifle out of focus.

A second story in this group is "Wind Over the Earth," which won the FREE PRESS award in 1954. A young man drives from Manila with his wife to his parents' home in Tarlac where his father is dying. He is anxious to talk to his fa-

¹ *THE DISTANCE TO ANDROMEDA AND OTHER STORIES*. Gregorio C. Brillantes. With an Introduction by N.V.M. Gonzalez. The Benipayo Press Publishers. Manila. 1960 [1961] Pp. 265. ₱3.50 cloth bound. ₱2.50 paper bound.

ther once more. He feels his father might have something to say to him. Upon arrival, however, he finds his father can no longer talk, and in his frustration he turns against the priest who administers the last sacraments and turns for physical solace to his wife who repels his advances since she is with child and his father is dying. Meanwhile the aged mother sits beside the dying man's bed, calm and competent, dreaming of the old days when her dying husband was a sullen and violent young man trying to win her hand. Of this story Leonard Casper (who was one of the three *FREE PRESS* judges in 1954) said that it "discovers how in our need we sometimes kill those who need us." One might disagree with that summary. The story seems rather to discover how, when we need them most, we sometimes hurt those who try to help us. An ironic situation, in any case. The story's defect is in motivation. The ferocity with which the man turns against the priest seems inadequately accounted for.

Another story in this group is called "The Young Man," a reminiscence about a boyhood friend recalled by an old photograph.

III

The "Very Good" stories are six: "The Living and the Dead", "The Years", "Faith, Love, Time and Dr. Lazaro", "The Light and the Shadow of Leaves", and "The Strangers", and "Rain".

"The Living and the Dead" (a phrase borrowed not from Joyce but from the Apostles' Creed) is a portrayal of cosmopolitan social life: its glittering surface and the tragedies hidden beneath. The story is laid in Manila and there are several authentic touches which are genuinely Philippine, but those touches are peripheral. They do not belong to the essence of the narrative. Change the *mah-jongg* game to bridge, change the place-names and the interjections, and this story might be laid in any big city of the western world.

The story is without plot. By the technique of the "re-volving viewpoint" it presents a picture of life in the elaborate

house of the Romanos, with its terrace and garden and the marble lions guarding the entrance. It is a comfortable life but not pleasant. It is fussy, showy, snobbish, selfish and consequently lonely; when danger threatens, it is not easy to ward off despair. A steep price, surely, for opulence.

Our inspection tour of the Romano household occurs on a Sunday, the day of young Sylvia Romano's coming-out party. We meet the family at breakfast: Sylvia, excited and in a hurry to go to church where her friends await her; her brother Chito, young-man-about-town, with something on his mind; their father, Jose, wealthy and respected, with something on *his* mind; and their mother, Nita, society matron, with nothing on *her* mind except the coming party, her daughter's picture in the papers, and her son's possible social entanglements. We meet Mrs. Romano again later in the day, at *mah-jongg* with the ladies who come to see her. We get to know young Chito Romano in the evening during his sister's party. He is in formal wear, but he is not dancing. He sits in the car, his pretty partner crying beside him. She is going to have a baby, and she wants him either to marry her or to furnish her the money for an abortion. He won't do the first, and finds difficulty in doing the second—though his difficulty is procedural, not moral. He has no moral qualms. He is a very perplexed young man, very sorry for himself, and he hates the pretty girl who sits beside him crying helplessly.

Late at night, after the party is over, we get to know Mr. Romano himself. He, too, is very perplexed. He is a man of means and a man of position—successively judge, governor, congressman. But he has not always been a faithful husband, nor has he always been scrupulously honest. Large sums have been embezzled, and exposure is imminent. All alone in the darkness of the house—and the darkness of his mind—he toys with the idea of suicide. Then the suggestion (the barest suggestion) of the fire of hell, and the thought (again the faintest) of the Crucified send him to his knees—only to be rudely brought back to his feet when his wife enters the room,

switches on the light, and noisily resumes her chatter while applying cold cream to her unattractive face.

IV

"The Years" (like the preceding) follows the pattern most often used by Brillantes, that of the "revolving viewpoint." The spotlight is focused, on each member of a family in turn, resting finally on the most important character—in this case the father: a prosperous man in middle age, quite popular, quite respected, with a fine home in a provincial capital and a fine family and much promise ahead of him. During his wife's birthday party he feels suddenly sick, goes upstairs by himself, and then, all alone in the upper room while the noise of the party is going on below, he suffers a heart attack. This climax is quite unexpected and it is well told. The attack subsides, but the man is a different man. He has just had what the banal writers would call a "significant" experience. He has just seen for himself how all alone a man really is when face to face with the basic question of life, namely the problem of death and what happens after it. He has also seen how short are the years allotted to a man, too short for the great projects he has dreamed of.

It has been objected against this story that the climax comes too unexpectedly. The reader is completely unprepared for it. But this, though ordinarily a defect, is in this case a virtue. It dramatizes the point of the story: how unexpected death is; how it often comes when no one has the least premonition of its coming.

In the Palanca Awards for 1960 the second prize was given to Brillantes' "Faith, Love, Time and Dr. Lazaro". The situation in the story is similar to that in the others. Dr. Lazaro has built up a very successful medical practice in the town and the surrounding rural areas. One evening he is called to attend a dying baby in a distant farm. He goes, his son Tony driving the car. The baby is hopeless when they get to it, but while the doctor is trying various palliatives, Tony pours water on the baby's head and baptizes it.

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.¹ 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

¹THE DEVIL FLOWER. New York, Hill and Wang, 1959.