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## **Bernad: Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree**

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## Review Articles

### *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree*

As the title suggests, Father Bernad's collection of essays on Filipino literature<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to evaluate the status of Philippine writing in English and to see it (as "bamboo") in relation to the verdant summer foliage of English literature (the "greenwood tree"). Whether the author intended it or not, the book has its greatest appeal for prospective readers who have not yet been introduced to Philippine literature in English, particularly in the field of fiction.

At the outset Father Bernad makes it clear that he does not seek to be "definitive". In the opening lines of the Preface he states:

This book is not a treatise. It is neither exhaustive nor profound. It is merely a collection of essays dealing with Filipino literature in English.

Bernad makes some evaluations in this "collection" of essays but he has tried, he says, "to avoid anything that seems pretentious". He makes no large claims. He limits himself to a few writers, mostly of prose fiction, and omits making any comment on Philippine poets or their work. His achievement lies in the effort he has put forth to make Philippine literature in English less of an unknown quantity, less of "caviar to the

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<sup>1</sup> BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE. Essays on Filipino Literature in English. By Miguel A. Bernad. S.J. Manila: Bookmark, 1961. xiii, 128 pp.

general". Bernad writes for the layman interested in literature, not for the person interested in formal criticism. He writes for the reader who may want to become acquainted with the works of some of our more gifted Filipino writers without, however, becoming too involved in the technicalities of fiction. He writes for the student beginning to feel his way around Philippine Literature. I will put it this way: Bernad gives the starting point; the reader can go on from there himself — if he wants to.

In the Preface and opening chapters Father Bernad makes some very pertinent points. He remarks that when we speak of Philippine writing we should neither magnify its greatness all out of proportion to its real worth nor should we dismiss it with contempt or with a few patronizing words. The first chapter is well-written and makes one pause to think. Bernad deftly points out that there is really nothing strange or incongruous about the fact that Filipinos today write, for the most part, in English. The great Semitic biographers — Mark, Luke and John — wrote the Gospels in Greek, and Paul of Tarsus wrote his Epistles in Greek. Though Jews, they belonged to the Hellenistic culture that Philip and Alexander of Macedon (neither of whom was really Greek) had spread throughout the East. St. Augustine wrote masterpieces in Latin and he was an African. It is therefore not impossible, Bernad asserts, that perhaps in the future some Filipino writer might create a literary masterpiece in English, just as did Joseph Conrad, the Polish novelist.

In Chapter Two Father Bernad states that the Filipino is in the unique position of belonging geographically to Asia but of sharing ideologically in Western humanism. The Filipino is the heir of Greece and Rome as well as of China and India. And Bernad rejoices that "the Filipino, while being distinctively and irrevocably himself, should have many things in common with other nations", not the least of which is language and cultural tradition.

In the next six chapters Bernad discusses the short story writers and novelists whom he considers as having accomplished much that is of lasting value in Philippine writing. These

writers, incidentally, are all men. He assigns a later chapter to women writers but makes detailed evaluation of only one—Aida Rivera. He also includes a short essay on Raul Manglapus who is more of an orator than a prose writer but who, Bernad says, is noteworthy for having the integrity to write his own speeches as well as for the quality of the speeches themselves.

One chapter in *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE* makes a brief comment on the Filipino theater: the playwrights, dramatic guilds, and the problems of the Philippine theater in general. Father Bernad points to the lack of professionalism on the Philippine legitimate stage as constituting its most serious problem. By lack of professionalism he means not the absence of drama or dramatic talent but rather the fact that in this country it is financially difficult to put on a good play and impossible to make a living solely from the stage. "There is a Filipino theater, and it is professional in everything except money." Although Bernad states that without an audience no great drama can evolve, he does not answer the question which he himself seems to pose, namely, how does one develop an audience?

Father Bernad's concluding chapter (XII) is a neat synthesis of the first two essays and an assertion that the most vigorous as well as most promising Filipino literature is in English, although this literature, like that written in some Philippine dialects, is in an inchoate state. Bernad points to three principal causes for this "inchoate" state: the economic, the linguistic, and the cultural. Economically, one would starve in the Philippines if one were to dedicate oneself solely to the difficult task of writing. Unless he is wealthy and possessed of great leisure, the writer must seek other means to make a living. Linguistically, Filipinos have not had a thorough chance to assimilate the genius of any particular language (nor, incidentally, develop a genius in their own). The Filipino literature in Spanish which was beginning to blossom at the end of the 19th century could not be understood by the generation of Filipinos who grew up under the new American regime of the 1900's. Culturally, Bernad asserts, we face our most serious

drawback. According to him we are in danger of cultural isolation in the Philippines — of being islanded culturally as we are islanded in geography, if we cut ourselves off both from the cultural riches of Graeco-Roman civilization which is our heritage and from our own Asian culture. Only by recognition of what we are and what we have become, by a recognition of what constitutes our roots, can our literature grow to something great.

So far, perhaps, one may agree in the main with Father Bernad's opinions. However, in the six chapters dedicated to the individual fiction writers, there is room for every sort of disagreement, mainly (perhaps) with the method of criticism which Bernad chooses to employ in his evaluation of their work. It is a method which some quarters would consider limited and narrow though not necessarily inept or incompetent. It is limited in the sense that Bernad does not go beyond a certain frame of reference, the Catholic (as distinct from the catholic, meaning universal) point of view; and it is narrow in the sense that it is highly personal and does not take varying literary tastes into account. Personally I admire the fact that Bernad always gives his *own* opinions about a particular writer's merits or defects regardless of that writer's settled literary reputation and even at the risk of being called narrow and limited. There is little question, however, that his method is one with which others may easily disagree.

It must be reiterated that Father Bernad does not aim at profound analysis or formal and technical criticism in *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE* but rather at evaluating what he thinks are a writer's strongest points as well as his weak ones. He writes to awaken interest in the work of the authors he discusses rather than merely to censure or praise them, and he lays down as a premise for his evaluation the assertion that Filipino literature in English is not "great"; it is still a "small thing".

There is much to praise in Filipino writing. It is an inchoate literature, but within a modest compass it has its masterpieces.

He tries to give in *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE* a quick glance at these masterworks. His list is choice: he discusses Manuel Arguilla, Alejandro Roces, Bienvenido Santos, N. V. M. Gonzalez, Nick Joaquin, and Gregorio Brillantes (in that order). And he writes mainly for the reader who has had little or no acquaintance with the work of these writers.

The chapter on Manuel Arguilla is one of the best essays in the book. Bernad writes with sympathy and simplicity of the Ilocano region which forms the basic fabric of Arguilla's best stories. Arguilla is credited with authenticity, with rustic charm and lyricism in his Ilocano short stories. Bernad singles out two stories which catch the flavor of the Philippine countryside—*Midsummer* and *How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife*—and rates them Arguilla's best. Nowhere does Bernad make a telling criticism of Arguilla but he does make some clarifying synopses of stories. He credits Arguilla with having focussed the attention of his contemporaries upon the countryside and the barrios. (In this regard he considers Arguilla's influence to have been decisive.) He describes Arguilla's prose as possessing a lyric quality, particularly in the nostalgic description of the La Union seacoast. The small defects he notes are the "mixing of tenses" and (it would seem) the fact that religion is almost wholly absent from Arguilla's stories (if this omission can indeed be considered a defect).

In discussing the "rooster" stories of Alejandro Roces, Father Bernad gives the reader partial synopses of the main arguments of each story. He credits Roces with charm in the telling of these stories — and singles out the elements that have become what he calls the trademarks of Roces' style: maximum dialogue and minimum comment made invariably with tongue in cheek. The stories are highly sophisticated, humorous and ironic, and display the author's expertise in the handling of dialogue. The stories are not only entertaining, Bernad adds, they are based on accurate information; so that if cockfighting were to disappear entirely from the Philippine scene (not very likely!), much of cockfighting lore could be reconstructed from the stories in *OF COCKS AND KITES*.

Roces is credited with presenting not only much of the ritual, but even the mental attitudes of the inveterate gambler—his feverish activity, his ingenuity, his anxiety, his frustrations, his incorrigible optimism and even the strange honor and honesty that reign in the *galleras*. When Bernad uses the “healing knife” of criticism on Rocés, it is merely to point to the minor incongruities that have struck him particularly, for instance, the words that (he affirms) are sometimes used inaccurately or that are out of harmony with the context and clash with the generally ingenuous narrative. On the whole, Bernad rates Rocés highly. He calls the rooster stories “delightful, memorable, and among the best in our literature”.

Bienvenido Santos is also rated highly — as the best portrayer of the Filipino expatriate who has made America his home. *YOU LOVELY PEOPLE* gives us a many-sided picture of the Filipino abroad. There is much beauty and nobility in the life portrayed but the picture presented is “mainly one of dislocation, of emotional and cultural starvation compensated for by reckless poker games and visits to unwholesome nightclubs and evil houses”. Ambo, the hero of the book, is assessed by Bernad as a character who is kind, self-sacrificing, and though illiterate endowed with a wisdom not learned in school. Ambo is the character who, upon returning home to the Philippines, can no longer be at home in his own country. In Santos’ collections of short stories about Filipinos in America, Bernad chooses as most poignant those stories which deal with the marriages which usually begin idyllically but end in tragedy or pathos.

Carlos Bulosan and Bienvenido Santos both write of America, but Bernad finds the latter more successful. For one thing, he says, Santos is not touched by bitterness against America as Bulosan is in his stories. The style of Santos, furthermore, is simple; he is straightforward in narrative technique. On the whole, Bernad thinks, Santos uses simple language — language that is weighted with emotion but which possesses a rhythm that approaches musicality. Tone and atmosphere are enhanced by sparing but carefully chosen imagery. According to

Bernad, Santos fails only in his few attempts at symbolic treatment.

Father Bernad prefers *YOU LOVELY PEOPLE* to Santos' second collection of stories—*BROTHER, MY BROTHER*, which "does not possess the same unity of subject or the same interest as the earlier volume". In his evaluation Bernad says the stories fall into four groups according to theme. He likes the Sulucan and Bicol stories best and deems the war and school stories weakest. Bernad notes that the unity in *BROTHER, MY BROTHER* is marred by the disconcerting change of the identity of the narrator but his over-all evaluation is that Santos writes well and has power to move the reader, even though the emotions depicted are always pitched in low key and never high-strung.

There is little question that Santos is the foremost interpreter of the Filipinos-in-exile, the ordinary, nameless *Pinoy* in America; and the bulk of his claim to literary fame will undoubtedly rest on his lucid and sympathetic interpretation of the Filipino abroad who, by choice or circumstance, has severed himself from his native land and thereby suffers emotional, social and cultural estrangement.

Just as Santos excels in the portrayal of the *Pinoy* in America, Father Bernad asserts, so is N. V. M. Gonzalez most excellent when he writes of the *kaingin* folk in Mindoro. Bernad describes the subject and theme of Gonzalez's early stories (published in a collection entitled *CHILDREN OF THE ASH-COVERED LOAM*) as a whole but makes no evaluation or analysis of the individual stories. He repeats what other critics have said of these early stories: that they possess "absolute authenticity", that they possess a "biblical quality" in their simplicity of narration and economy of detail. In general Bernad affirms that the "later" stories show greater maturity of workmanship, but "some of them tend to bog down in a multiplicity of detail".

Father Bernad begins discussing *A SEASON OF GRACE* by giving a surface reading of what happens in the story. He says it is a story of the land, of human existence in new *kaingin* clearings, and he affirms that the story contains a good deal of charm and certain touches of symbolism. He introduces us



to the main theme and some of its interplaying facets but he makes no analysis of character — which in a novel should be the most important aspect, if we are to understand the novel as showing either the development or disintegration of character. Bernad says only that Sabel is the best drawn character in the book. Perhaps this omission of character analysis is a telling albeit tacit criticism of Gonzalez's novel. Bernad asserts that the rest of the characters in the book are "shadowy figures", meaning perhaps that the author has not succeeded in creating characters that are living, convincing, and individualized persons. Yet Bernad says the novel possesses "artistic value". A SEASON OF GRACE is also, he claims, "a social document of some importance" for it portrays some of the actual conditions in the newly settled places in the Philippines. Bernad then mentions what other reviewers have noted about the novel. For instance, one was appalled at the primitive conditions described in Mindoro which is only forty-five minutes by air from Manila but is, in culture, centuries into the past. The same critic was also struck by the apparent absence of church and school life in Mindoro.

The over-all estimate is favorable to A SEASON OF GRACE. Bernad says that "there are enough beautiful things to merit a second reading or even a third . . . in it we find the sound of birds, the smell of grass, the coming on of night, and the fragrance of ripened rice". All this is another way of saying that Gonzalez has succeeded in awakening a vivid sensuous response in the reader.

Gonzalez's other novel—THE BAMBOO DANCERS—receives a more precise critical evaluation. The main fault of the book, Bernad states, is the absence of an organic unity which would knit together the wealth of material found in it. Consequently the book "resembles a travelogue: episodic, but not a dramatic whole". Bernard has, however, given the author a chance to explain his novel in an appendix and Gonzalez takes the opportunity to elucidate. The form of this novel, the author claims, is that of a "confession" (as defined by Northrop Frye) which in this novel takes the shape of "partial recall and of conscience".

The novel speaks of sterility. It has to do not so much with the excitement of moments re-lived but with the illumination of self-discoveries, Gonzalez maintains. And the story is nothing more than "a series of such illuminations". Plot, for Gonzalez, means "threads and threads of this or that image running through and constantly being enlarged". Gonzalez says:

Fiction's business is not to look for life but to find a name for the problems of life, to identify, to define . . . . In *BAMBOO DANCERS* my hope was to define ourselves today, to identify our frivolities, and our moral emptiness.

Father Bernad finds that though there is an attempt at symbolism by means of the bamboo dancers, the force of the symbol is not quite clear, the total situation, whatever it is, is only obscurely hinted at and not clearly perceived or dramatized in terms of the symbol. Gonzalez comments on this point in his "talking back".

. . . the bamboo dance does in the end take on a transformation (which is my idea of what fiction should do with "life" symbols). On the terms the novel uses . . . it starts from the *tinikling* idea literally, it now becomes the sum of such images as old man Rama with his bamboo cane, Herb Lane hurting himself in his "dry run" and Rama himself at his near-drowning (actually a baptism image) and threatened by the loosened outriggers of his boat.

It seems to this reviewer, however, even after the author's own explanation, that the symbol of the bamboo dancers is not *immediately* forceful and that Father Bernad is right when he says that the symbol is not clear though it has great potentialities. His critical evaluation of *BAMBOO DANCERS* notwithstanding, Bernad rates Gonzalez as being in the "front rank of Filipino writers".

One of Bernad's most interesting commentaries is the essay on Nick Joaquin. He does not unequivocally admit that Joaquin is the best Filipino writer living although he notes that some critics maintain this. But he calls Joaquin a "genuine artist . . . possessing unusual power in his fiction". And since Joaquin's writing is, at least, consistent, Bernad states unequivocally that Nick Joaquin—

. . . loves the past—the colonial past—and shows a genuine sense of history . . . . The past was a haunted world where the future intruded upon the past, the past dogged the future, and past and future both merged in the present.

Bernad characterizes the work of Nick Joaquin in the phrase “haunted intensity”. A major defect which he finds within the range of Joaquin’s fiction is the lack of serenity. Joaquin seems to specialize in resentments and violent explosive passions. Serenity is alien to his characters: they are usually tense and tend to be hysterical, erupting into frenzies of love, hate, despair, doubt, repentance. Bernad takes Joaquin’s style to task and claims that “the lush, exotic manner of narration demands that situations be unusual and climaxes violent. The style accounts for a good deal of the hysterics.” Bernad then proceeds to list some consequences of the author’s having to treat of “hysterics” because of the defective (in this sense) style. He says, to begin with, that there is a resultant confusion of values: lacking serenity, the vision of life and its problems cannot be a clear vision but must be a distorted view of ideas in awry moral perspective (viz. *Three Generations*). Secondly, man and woman do not “complement” each other in Joaquin’s stories but are mutually hostile; they seek pleasure from each other but love guardedly and hate intensely. In fact it seems that one must always seek to dominate and break the other.

The stories themselves, Bernad asserts, are Christian and Catholic in setting and atmosphere but they do not contain genuine Christian values and attitudes because religion is depicted as “a complex of external observances culminating in the La Naval procession . . . a cultural heritage associated with the past rather than a vital outlook associated with Christian theology”. Father Bernad’s tone seems to be one of censure: that this absence of genuine Christian values and attitudes is also a defect in Joaquin’s writing. However, this absence is not necessarily a fault, certainly not an artistic one. Joaquin could merely be recreating, in his stories, the life among a people to whom religion *was* nothing more than a complex of external observances. Even today, what is the Catholic religion to many Filipinos except “a complex of external observances” culminat-

ing in some novena or procession or fiesta? By presenting religion as merely an outward trapping in the lives of the people of our colonial past, Joaquin seems to be propounding a thesis, namely, that the present moral decay of our people can be traced in part to the kind of religion which our forebears practised and handed down to us.

In spite of his reservations, Bernad calls Nick Joaquin a "genuine artist" and affirms that his artistry lies in the retelling of old legends. Probably few will quarrel with the statement that Joaquin is always most successful when he writes his legends. His interest in history and his eye for detail make it possible for him to recreate the past with great vividness.

The essay ends with the assertion that Joaquin "dislikes modernity, Americans and things American intensely" but the reasons Bernad advances for saying this are not conclusive. He says (and we can agree wholeheartedly) that Joaquin has aroused discussion and imitation as few Filipino writers have. Finally, Father Bernad credits Joaquin with an "interesting thesis" in the one play he has written so far—*The Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, the thesis being that "Filipino culture has no father and no son; it has no one but itself to save it from destruction", meaning that a cultural gap exists between the Hispanic language and traditions of older Filipinos on the one hand and the language and traditions of their American-educated sons on the other. Bernad does not say so, but he implies that it is concern with this very real problem of finding his own identity as a Filipino that makes Nick Joaquin the most fascinating writer of the Filipino short story today.

The last fiction writer Bernad discusses in a complete chapter is also the youngest one—Gregorio Brillantes. He credits this writer with bringing certain distinctive qualities to the Filipino short story. The characters of Brillantes, he affirms, are authentic as a rule: they are Catholics brought up in the faith and religion is part of their lives, but they suffer an erosion of faith due to a secular education abroad or to a preoccupation with material things or to lapses into moral misconduct. The one major defect in the stories, he says, is faulty

motivation: the characters are not rendered dramatically enough to make their actions believable. This statement would seem to be a contradiction of his earlier affirmation that Brillantes' characters are "authentic". Bernad also notes that Brillantes uses the "revolving viewpoint". He gives us the synopses of some stories but nowhere makes a deep analysis of any one story, nor does he make explicit what he means by Brillantes' being at his best in *The Rain* and *The Strangers*. The reasons Bernad advances for praising Brillantes as a writer are not literary ones, although they are perfectly valid reasons for liking Brillantes as a person. In this regard Father Bernad says that Brillantes (1) possesses the idealism of the young without their naivete, (2) believes in the goodness of people though he knows they can be bad, and (3) believes in divine grace.

Towards the end of the chapter Father Bernad mentions that there are "defects" in Brillantes' style, "trivial defects", but he does not specify or elaborate on them. On the whole, he finds the work of Brillantes satisfactory, commendable and competent. He sums up the chapter by saying that the best praise of Brillantes has been bestowed by N.V.M. Gonzalez who once said: "It will be difficult to understand this generation without reading Brillantes".

Personally I believe that Father Bernad could have said more about the work of Brillantes. Of the stories singled out for comment, *The Distance to Andromeda* was explained by Brillantes himself who tells us that in this story, as well as in all of his other stories, the central theme is "life as a movement towards a destination, life as a pilgrimage". The stories that Bernad finds meritorious he mentions by title; sometimes he gives the theme or a brief synopsis of plot . . . but there never is an analysis or criticism of significant dimension.

All in all, Father Bernad in *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE* has tried to fulfill the role of the "most understanding critic who must occasionally find fault . . . who must take the same risk that the physician takes when he prescribes unpleasant medicine or a surgical operation. The needle and the knife are painful, but they are part of the *healing* art of medicine."

The book is not medicinal, however, nor painful to read. The prose is controlled and disciplined and makes for smooth and easy reading. Bernad's prose is nowhere more limpid than in the descriptive passages on Ilocos (in the chapter on Manuel Arguilla). British and Australian readers have found the quality of Father Bernad's English particularly striking—a style emptied of jargon and prose cliches, at once terse, limpid and most effective. Best of all, he has succeeded in arousing interest in Filipino writers. From now on, said an English friend after reading *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE*, "I will try to read some of the Filipino writers, especially Joaquin".

The essays in Father Bernad's book could very well serve as a spur to make more people read the work of the writers discussed. His tone is one of sympathy for the writers and of encouragement for the prospective reader to "see for himself". Perhaps this is the right attitude to adopt considering the present state of Philippine letters: it is growing but it needs direction. It should be pruned rather than uprooted. There is every indication at the moment that in time we shall reap a healthy harvest in Filipino literature in English. For now our writers who show promise ought to be encouraged. This encouragement, I think, Father Bernad has given admirably in *BAMBOO AND THE GREENWOOD TREE*.

CARMITA LEGARDA DE CARRION

### *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*

One approaches the task of reviewing *THE WOMAN WHO HAD TWO NAVELS* with great reluctance, for here is excellence. Being asked to review a novel such as this is like being asked to explain a poem (whose meaning is in its being) or to explain the mystery of one's faith (half learned in darkness and light). The public articulation of a private joy is always a concession to the legitimate demand made on those who can only read

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<sup>1</sup> *THE WOMAN WHO HAD TWO NAVELS*. By Nick Joaquin. Manila: Philippine Center, 1961. 226 pp.