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The Stories of Bienvenido Santos

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

AMONG the recipients of this year's Palanca Awards was Mr. Bienvenido Santos of Legaspi, Albay, who was awarded the Second Prize of ₱500 for the short story in English. It is not our intention to discuss that story here. We hope to discuss it at a later date in our biennial survey of Philippine short stories.¹ Our present concern is Mr. Santos' recently published little volume of stories entitled *You Lovely People*.²

These stories are both engrossing and sobering. They are sobering as fact, engrossing as fiction, and perhaps the most convenient way to discuss them is to approach them first as fiction and then as fact.

I

As fiction these stories deserve high praise. In the last issue of this Quarterly we reviewed Mr. Santos' little volume of poems, *The Wounded Stag*, and we professed ourselves less than enthusiastic about his poetry. But his prose is different. Mr. Santos writes simply but with a type of prose that is emotionally weighted, like a river carrying much allu-

¹ See M. A. Bernad, "Philippine Short Stories 1952" *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* I (1953) 5ff; "Philippine Short Stories 1953-54" *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* III (1955) 3ff.

² *You Lovely People*. By Bienvenido N. Santos. Manila. The Benipayo Press, 1955. Pp. xi, 185.

vial content but without the turgidity that attends it. The emotion is hardly ever consciously adverted to, but it is implicit in the tone, the atmosphere, the narrative tempo, the length or brevity of the sentences, the rhythm that sometimes approaches musicality, or the sparing but carefully selected imagery that appeals to eye or ear or nostrils—like the sudden ceasing of Christmas bells or the scent of apples that pervades the air. The style is so compelling that one overlooks the misprints and fails to notice (except on rereading) the few inelegancies of tense or idiom that occasionally mar the narrative. Yet the style is so simple, the emotions so underplayed, that local critics have characterized Mr. Santos' style as "pedestrian."

When the stories that are collected in this little volume first appeared in the local magazines, they did not attract much favorable notice. The story entitled "Scent of Apples" was included in one anthology, but the others were comparatively unnoticed. Some local critics found them wanting in technique. Indeed, Mr. Santos' narrative technique is straightforward. There are few attempts at symbolic treatment, and these are (as in "Ash Wednesday") not always successful. But the nineteen stories in this volume should perhaps not be assessed as individual short stories. This is not a book of short stories in the ordinary sense as is for instance a volume of stories by Saki or O. Henry or Katherine Mansfield or Graham Greene. The stories in Mr. Santos' book are not individual pieces but connected chapters of an autobiography, except that there is a twofold reason why this book should not be called an autobiography: in the first place the treatment is fictitious; in the second place the main character is not the author but a group—the Filipinos in the United States, particularly in the Eastern States.

These characters are well drawn and of an amazing variety, but chief among them is an individual called Pablo—Ambo for short—who is as interesting a character as any in fiction. He has lived a long time in the United States. He apparently has a good job. He is almost illiterate, never having had a chance to study English properly. As a consequence, his conversation (when he is forced to carry it on in English)

is limited to a few stock phrases often incorrect and doubtless incorrectly pronounced. He is endowed however with a wisdom that grows with the years and with an acuteness of observation which makes him beyond all seeming a well-informed man of the world. Best of all, he is a kindly man, self-effacing, self-sacrificing, and very paternal—even grandfatherly—towards other Filipinos in America. It is Ambo who introduces them to friends when they are friendless, plays poker with them (and he is a phenomenal poker player), takes them to the restaurants where they will be most at home, listens to their troubles, consoles them in their afflictions, and when they die penniless (apparently not an infrequent case) he goes about among other Filipinos asking for contributions for the funeral, seeing to it that none of his countrymen should be without decent burial. It is from Ambo that many of the stories in this book are taken, retold and polished in Mr. Santos' style but put in Ambo's mouth.

Mr. Santos assures me that Ambo is a real person in real life. If so, it is good to know that there are such kindly persons in America who are a tower of strength to their countrymen in time of trouble and a source of endless fun in happier moments. We can only regret that Ambo went abroad leaving behind him in the Philippines his wife and children and returning to them only after the recent war when long absence and the customs of a foreign land had rendered him less fit to live again among his own. We must also regret that his life in America has dulled his moral sense, thinking it a kindness to take his friends to a burlesque show or a bawdy house. We must regret that his solicitude over his countrymen's burial could not also have extended to their dying moments, bringing them the peace of a well-provided death. It is significant that on the crowded ship coming home Ambo goes to confession, perhaps the first confession in a very long time. The last glimpse we have of him is not without bitterness: he goes out of the luxurious office of a prosperous society doctor in Manila whom he had befriended and helped in Washington but who would not care to be seen with him in society-conscious Manila. In this sense Ambo is a pathetic character,

a type of the dislocated Filipino, and Mr. Santos' stories (without being satirical) are a searching criticism of life.

It is also remarkable that, except for the touch of bitterness in the ultimate and penultimate stories, this volume contains no bitterness at all despite their often pathetic theme. The tales are told with feeling but without sentimentality, with tolerance, understanding and sympathy. And it is noteworthy that the touch of bitterness in the last two stories of the book is directed not towards Americans or foreigners but towards Filipinos who do not "remember past summers" or who do not have the courage to stay in the Philippines to help rebuild a pulverized nation:

"There's nothing wrong about getting an American citizenship and wishing to leave the Philippines."

.....
"Only rats leave a sinking ship."

"Don't you think that's too strong a term?"

"The feeling it expresses is strong."

II

Mr. Santos' book must be assessed not only as a collection of short stories, a work of creative fiction, but also as a portrait of an actually existing situation, the life of Filipinos in America. The book is factual in two senses. In the first place, many of the details are authentic and some of the characters recognizable—like "Father Ocampo" who with "his companion priests (was) in Rome when Hitler's soldiers started marching all over Europe. But these priests managed to take passage later on one of the exchange ships that plied between Europe and America" and continued their theological studies in the United States. "Father Ocampo" preaches a sermon on board ship the day before the ship arrives in Manila with a shipload of Filipinos returning home to a devastated Philippines. That sermon is incidentally an excellent example of good preaching. "By tomorrow," the priest is made to say, "we shall be on Philippine soil again. Those of us who are coming home for the first time in many years will be shocked to see

the ruins of our towns and cities. We are prepared for such sights. We have seen pictures of our blasted cities. But there are ruins other than the eyes can see. Men whose spirits the war had scarred, men who had seen the worst, known the darkest things, whose faith the war has shaken or completely destroyed. It might not be easy for those of us whom the war had not touched, who had not lived in a captured country, or known fear and despair, to understand what it is to live among embittered men...."

But the book is (or aims at being) factual in another and more important sense. More important than the details is the total picture itself of Filipino life in America. It does not aim at being a comprehensive picture: no picture is. But the picture that is presented, if true to life (various readers and our own limited observation would seem to confirm its authenticity in its broad outlines) is sobering and disturbing. It is a picture of dislocation, of emotional and cultural starvation compensated for by reckless poker games or visits to unwholesome night clubs or going about with women of dubious character. That is in the case of the student "pensionado." It is a different and sometimes a sadder story with the young man (in many cases hardly more than a boy) who leaves home to seek his fortune in America and then drifts from city to city washing dishes, working in canning factories, playing with a string orchestra at some night club, eking out a difficult existence and meanwhile growing old in years, in limbs, in outlook, in soul. At first he writes home fairly often, enclosing an occasional money order for a few dollars, giving everyone at home the impression that he has found financial success. But as the drudgery becomes more and more deadening, the letters become fewer and fewer and finally cease altogether. Eventually the exile becomes dead morally, calloused to evil, cynical of the boyhood idealism that he once cherished.

The most poignant pictures drawn by Santos are those of the marriages of Filipinos with American women, beginning idyllically, ending in tragedy or at least in pathos. A local critic, Mrs. Dolores Feria, says that Mr. Santos' portrait of

the Filipino-American marriage is not quite accurate. She thinks that Mr. Santos has not made enough allowance for a "fairly general characteristic" of the American woman: "her tendency to procrastinate over child-bearing." This, she says, has never been quite accepted by the Filipino husbands who marry American wives. Nevertheless Mrs. Feria herself admits that Santos' "sensitive analysis of the marriages stretched taut by the warped and twisted social pressures of their surroundings, with their accompanying strains of neurosis and depravity is essentially honest." Mrs. Feria, incidentally, is a good authority in this connection. We are told that she is an American lady married to a Filipino and the mother of three children. But we must remember that the marriages Santos is talking about are not those of Filipinos with Americans in the Philippines living in a Philippine milieu, but of a Muriel who is turned out of doors by her Boston relations for marrying a Filipino and then becomes a dipsomaniac; of an Alice whose husband would not be seen with her in public and who must enjoy a movie with him furtively because they cannot be seen entering the theater together. The picture drawn is heart-rending. We hope it is not true to life. If true, it is a great pity that in God's world it is not always possible for people who love each other with an innocent, a self-sacrificing love to live happily together.

This little volume by Mr. Santos deserves attention. Mr. Santos, winner of several Palanca Awards and of a New York Herald-Tribune prize, is a good story-teller and he is blessed (as we noted in our review of his poetry) with an outlook on life that is basically sane. Few Filipinos now writing can write as well as he. Few could have handled the same material without bitterness or unpleasant jingoism. Few have the material to write about that he has and, though that material was in large part ephemeral (let us hope that another world war will not again occur to keep so many Filipino students stranded abroad), it is also in large part permanent. There are many Filipinos in America. Their situation is worth exploring not only by the writers of fiction but by those who are interested in the salvation of souls.