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Self-Appraisal: Looking at Ourselves

Review Author: Antonio T. Leetai

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SELF-APPRAISAL

LOOKING AT OURSELVES. By Delfin Fl. Batacan. Manila. Philaw Publishing. 1956. Pp. 301.

In varying degrees and with varying success, Filipino writers since Rizal have been urging their countrymen to self-appraisal and self-improvement. Mr. Batacan is in the stream of this tradition when he gives us *Looking at Ourselves*. If the book does not offer us something completely new, we may at least find in it a new approach to an old problem, focused from the viewpoint of the author's day-to-day experiences.

In this book, Mr. Batacan makes an attempt—never a popular one—at putting before his countrymen the foibles, failings and shortcomings which attach to them as a people, with the hope that by thus being exposed again in a kind of national examination of conscience these faults may at least be diminished if not entirely rooted out. The author catalogs and diagnoses the undesirable traits which in his mind hold up our fuller self-realization as one among the free peoples of the world. He discusses what is wrong with parents, students, teachers, businessmen, politicians, etc. and invites Filipinos to examine their present behavior in the light of the ideals and teachings of our national heroes, notably of Rizal, Mabini and Bonifacio. Also included in this volume are typical comments of foreigners as well as of contemporary Filipino writers on Filipinos.

It is not to be expected of course that everyone will agree with the conclusions of the author. Some may object for example to what they will call an over-simplified view of or a wrongly placed emphasis on our peculiar shortcomings. Others may feel that the suggested solutions are too sketchily outlined and not sufficiently motivated to effect the desired changes. Others still may shake their heads at the author's tendency in some cases to blame the present too much on the past.

Mr. Batacan's treatment of his material is popular rather than academic. For this purpose he has in large part chosen the technique of the humorous satire for which he displays commendable skill. This is proper and sound procedure for it assures interest and avoids dull didacticism and tedious moralizing. In choosing this method, however, the author has not, in the opinion of this

reviewer, entirely escaped the pitfall of the satiric approach, namely, the temptation to turn satire into caricature which in turn opens the door to exaggeration. An example is found on page 32 where, speaking of the Filipino's fondness for fiestas, the author says: "The average Filipino will get sick if he does not feast or is not feasted..." The difficulty with such a statement and others like it is not that they are exaggerations but that they hurt the total effectiveness of the work. "Qui nimis probat, nihil probat."

We could have wished, for the sake of the excellent objectives of the work, that the author had hammered his language into greater precision, compactness and force or that he had not allowed overworked expressions to creep into his writing or that he had checked more exactly the sources of his illustrative quotations or that he had guarded more rigidly against slang and an inclination to exploit the sound of words in puns or that he had not labored some obvious points. To cite cases at random: readers familiar with the character of the Prophet Isaiah will be somewhat surprised that Mr. Batacan attributes to that very austere prophet the maxim: "Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die." (p. 32). Instead of Roman soldiers, we have "the irreverent Jews" (p. 158) dicing over Christ's garments at the Crucifixion. In at least two places, the word "specie"—v.g. "a specie of envy" (p. 80)—is used as the singular of "species." The slang expression "chew the rag" appears as "chew the proverbial rug" (p. 68). These are trifling matters, to be sure, but they have a way of whittling down the more significant values of the book.

We applaud Mr. Batacan's civic-minded zeal and desire to promote social and moral improvement, and we hope that far from being shrugged off by his countrymen, *Looking at Ourselves* may discover abundant opportunities to contribute to what should be a nationwide effort at perfection.

ANTONIO T. LEETA