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The Diliman Review

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NOTES and COMMENT

The Diliman Review

THE APRIL NUMBER of *The Diliman Review*, a quarterly published by the University of the Philippines, has been received recently by us in exchange. In it Leopoldo Y. Yabes has a short but excellent study, entitled, "The Unity of the University," in which he says many things that are very sound, and seem to indicate a swelling stream of criticism levelled against the grab-bag educational theory that has ruled schools of the Philippines in a large measure for many years.

E. Aguilar Cruz speaks with good sense of the need of courageous art-criticism, and of the danger of encouraging mediocrity in art in general, and in writing in particular. In this he endorses some ideas previously expressed in the January number of *The Diliman Review* by Recaredo Demetillo, Professor of Oriental Literature at Silliman University, apropos of Teodoro Locsin's sweeping approval of Joaquin's poetry.

In the April issue Mr. Demetillo himself attempts some positive criticism of Mr. Joaquin in "Form and Symbology in the Fiction of Nick Joaquin." It is not our purpose here to give an opinion on Mr. Joaquin's work; that is done competently elsewhere in this issue of PHILIPPINE STUDIES. But there is a phase of Mr. Demetillo's critical method which we believe should not be allowed to pass unchallenged, and that is his use of psychological theory in the explanation of the motivation of certain characters of Mr. Joaquin's fiction, and even of the motivation of Mr. Joaquin himself.

Mr. Demetillo shows considerable ingenuity in discovering, or perhaps it would be more exact to say creating, erotic implications

in the devotion to the Blessed Virgin, as portrayed by Nick Joaquin in one of his stories, "The Legend of the Virgin's Jewel." Mr. Demetillo writes:

I also submit that the legend yields a purely personal significance for Nick Joaquin. I do not propose to discuss the psychology of the author—that is an aspect, which, while tempting, is not the province for the literary critic. But this much I have already suggested: that several of the male characters of Joaquin have an amatory attachment to the Virgin.

Let us pause here to note that, though Mr. Demetillo does not wish to discuss the author's psychology, he nevertheless implies here with clarity that cannot be missed that Mr. Joaquin and his characters are in the same boat. The critic goes on—after a few lines concerning another alleged deep-seated motivation of Mr. Joaquin, namely his nostalgia—and says:

Amatory devotion is very much in evidence. What lover's meticulous, intimate exactness is implied in the description of the Virgin: "He fled to the chapel. By the Sanctuary light he could barely make out the Virgin on the altar. But her face soared out of the dusk, her fingers curved out of it—the elusiveness of her smile steadied him." Nothing can be more exciting description than that! [Exclamation point Mr. Demetillo's.]

Brother Fernando calls the Virgin Mother "my Lady," which has definitely erotic connotations, and "my Mother." In the myths about Earth Mother and her son Adonis or Thammuz, the son is also the lover.

There is more in a similar vein; the general idea being that devotion to our Lady, both in the characters in question and in Nick Joaquin, is disguised lust.

Mr. Demetillo has been led into this far-fetched and unpleasant theory by two things. First by his unfamiliarity with Catholicity, and secondly by his psychological assumptions.

In his previous essay, in the January issue of *The Diliman Review*, Mr. Demetillo had said: ". . . the critic must be unusually well-informed about his subject." If Mr. Demetillo had been better informed about the devotion which Catholics, and indeed many Protestants, have to the Blessed Mother of God, he would not have

fallen into his error. He would have known that an explanation is very much nearer at hand.

We can very easily illustrate how gratuitous are Mr. Demetillo's conclusions. Americans speak of Washington as the "Father" of their country. Filipinos call Apolinario Mabini the "Brain of the Revolution." It requires only a very slight acquaintance with history to know that both these appellations derive from historical situations. If we read the story of the American Revolution on the one hand, or of the Philippine Revolution on the other, we find a completely satisfying explanation for both names.

So it is with the name "Mother," "our Mother," "my Mother" as applied to Mary. If Mr. Demetillo knew more about Catholicity, he would know that the concept of Mary as our Mother is an old tradition that stems from a historical fact or group of facts. Mary is called the Mother of men because, when her Son was dying on the Cross, he entrusted her to St. John the Evangelist with the historic words: "Behold thy Mother." This tender transaction—in which there was not the faintest vestige of the erotic—taken in the context of our kinship with Christ as adoptive sons of God, and of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, originated the age-old and universal practice of referring to Mary as "our Mother," by men, women and children, by old and young, by married and single, by priests and laity. That three Catholic characters in Joaquin's fiction loved Mary needs no other explanation. Mr. Demetillo writes: "Several of the Joaquin male characters are very much attached to the Virgin, a fact which cannot wholly or adequately be explained on the mere assumption that the author is a Roman Catholic or lives in a Catholic country."

Of course it can. Mr. Demetillo says that because he does not know Catholics. What would need an explanation would be the absence of such love. Just as it is not necessary to look far afield for a reason why three Englishmen or three million Englishmen went wild with enthusiasm at the coronation of their new Queen. She is the Queen of England and they are Englishmen. That is explanation enough. And Mary's prerogative, as Mother of our Brother and Head, is explanation enough for any Catholic's love for her.

As for the word "lady," that is the English translation of the

word "domina." It is true that in certain phases of English romantic literature "lady" was equivalent to "lady-love." But that is a secondary meaning, and subsequent entirely to the original and predominant signification. The word "domina," corresponding to "dominus" (cf. "our Lord") comes from the root "domo," to tame, to subdue. In fact, probably the English word "tame" is cognate. "Domina" therefore or "lady" means "one who rules," "a mistress" (not of course in the pejorative sense), "a queen," "a member of the royal family." While in some very rare uses there was, even in the Latin, an amatory meaning, namely wife or sweetheart, such a signification is clearly eliminated in the devotion to our Lady by the correlation with "our Lord", "dominus noster," and by the clear conscience of the Catholic people. Therefore "lady" is not only not amatory, but it would be difficult to find a feminine address less so. It denotes power, dignity, rule, nobility, majesty, maternal and queenly care.

The second difficulty with Mr. Demetillo is his psychological theory. Because of it he finds erotic explanations for human conduct which apparently is utterly unconnected with the erotic. And especially religion receives this interpretation. This psychology, become the instrument of literary criticism, possesses a tempting versatility, but that very quality is its undoing. No one will deny that sex plays a heavy role in human affairs or that its expressions and manifestations are manifold. And therefore it is, that a little ingenuity will enable the Freudian critic to find what he is looking for anywhere and everywhere, and finding it, to render his criticism ridiculous. Almost anything can provide an erotic parallel.

To show how easy this is, let us apply it to a most unlikely field, that of sports-writing. Suppose for example that a reporter describes the La Salle basketball team in highly laudatory terms. Nothing easier than to give such praise an erotic interpretation. Green is the color of fertility and the name "Green Archers" reminds us how deft the god Eros was with the bow and arrow. If another writer expresses enthusiasm for the Letran Knights, clearly that is just sublimation of the *libido*. Knights and ladies are an inseparable psychological duo. Or if the Ateneo is praised, the Ateneo's colors are blue and white, the colors of our Lady, and there we are, back to the Mother and Lady motif.

And who can deny this sort of thing? Not Nick Joaquin. Mr. Demetillo confesses about the alleged nostalgia motive that Joaquin himself would find the allegation "unbelievable." Our sportswriters cannot deny it. It is the sub-conscious. They do not know it. Only the critics know it. To deny it, is only to confirm it; eroticism is notoriously secretive. And what is to prevent us from saying in our turn that Mr. Demetillo's criticism is erotic and amatory? Nothing. How can he deny it? He may think the charge "unbelievable." But he would not know. Only *his* critics would know. Then he can always retaliate by a *tu quoque*, and so the process goes on. It is delirious.

And nothing could better illustrate the gratuitous character of this kind of interpretation than the manner in which Mr. Demetillo has risen from two innocent and most un-erotic words like "lady" and "mother" to find an amatory explanation. Especially is this true of the latter word. It would be hard in this rough and sinful world to find a person and a title around which man has gathered so much lofty, noble, *spiritual* idealism, as around the name and person of mother. Even in the basest characters the influence of a mother is elevating, purifying. And when apart from his mother in the flesh, man finds some other woman characterized by dignity, unselfish kindness, goodness, he often expresses his high *spiritual* esteem of her by calling her "mother."

It is true that in myth and in the history of the human race there have been rare, monstrous, unnatural exceptions to this, but the very heinousness of their conduct was accentuated by the height from which they fell, and the horror they aroused was testimony to the true sentiments of the human heart. But because of such falls, because some time there has been an erotic element in the relation of mother and son, to imply that therefore we must see in the mere use of the term, the mere mention of the loved name, an erotic implication, is so fantastic as to beggar belief.

There are other things that we are not very happy about in Mr. Demetillo's article. It seems to us that in many places his manner of speaking can lead to a misunderstanding of Catholicity. He says, for example: "The Virgin, on this level of interpretation is to be equated with Mariolatry, hence with the Roman Catholic version of Christianity." "The sin in the Garden of Eden involved

lust—for food, for sexual gratification, for intellectual equality with God. The Church, of course, has more or less held sex suspect.”

There are many things here which are open to misunderstanding. The Catholic Church's cultus of the Blessed Virgin Mary is not the same thing as the Catholic Church's "version of Christianity", if that is what Mr. Demetillo means. Devotion to (not "worship" of) our Blessed Mother is an important part of Catholicity, but it is still secondary and subordinate to (and, in fact, meaningless without) the worship of Christ, the Word Incarnate.

Incidentally to explain the sin of the Garden of Eden as one of lust is to embark on very original exegesis. There is not one word in the Genesis text to justify it, and no competent critic concedes the faintest probability to this interpretation. But such a meaning was necessary on Mr. Demetillo's psychological assumptions.

Finally, to say that the Church has always more or less held sex suspect is a generalization which contains more false implications than it does words. The Church holds that human nature is endowed with many appetites that have a tendency to run away with reason and conscience. Thus men make hogs of themselves and get drunk, become thieves and misers. These are appetites in revolt. The Church knows (and so does everybody else) that among the appetites the strongest and most rebellious, most likely to bid defiance to law, is the sexual appetite. In that sense the Church holds sex in suspicion, as she does eating and drinking, and seeking wealth.

But that concerns the excesses of sex. As for sex itself, the Church holds that in matrimony, when it is used according to the laws of matrimony, it is a holy thing, sustained and sanctified by a sacrament. She holds further, however, because of Christ's teaching and of St. Paul's after Him, that abstention from the use of sex, when undertaken for the love of God, is in itself a better service of Christ than marriage. And as a consequence of this teaching, and not because sex is held suspect, millions of men and women have lived lives of spotless purity. Finally the Church does not only hold the use of sex outside of matrimony and matrimony's laws to be suspect, but she holds it sinful, and fights it with every weapon at her disposal.

This article of Mr. Demetillo raises two questions in my mind. In the June issue of *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* Father Miguel Ber-

nad wrote a study of three short stories that had received prizes from the *Philippines Free Press*. One of those stories featured precisely this erotic interpretation of devotion to the Mother of God, that we find in Mr. Demetillo's criticism. Is it a coincidence that these two indications should come to our attention so closely together, or are they signs that this rationalization of devotion to the Mother of God is being more widely disseminated than we would have suspected?

The second question that arises is about Mr. Demetillo's concept of Christianity, for we presume he considers himself a Christian. Mr. Demetillo seems to see little to choose between the tenets of Christianity and the myths of paganism. But if that is an accurate interpretation of his position, he is very remote from Christianity.

Does Mr. Demetillo perhaps represent the logical term of a Mary-less Christianity? Have we here another manifestation of the oft-attested truth that where Mary is abandoned, Christ soon is too? Cardinal Newman, who knew both Protestantism and Catholicity so well, wrote in his *Difficulties of Anglicans*:

If we look through Europe we shall find, on the whole, that just those nations and countries have lost their faith in the divinity of Christ who have given up devotion to His Mother, and that those, on the other hand who had been foremost in her honor, have retained their orthodoxy.

L.A.C.

Distribution of Priests

RECENT WRITING ON MISSION WORK has carried several suggestions that something should be done to distribute the clergy of the world with reference to the Catholic populations. An article in the *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, "L'appel de l'Amerique latine" by J. Luzzi, S.J. touches this question with reference especially to the deplorable situation in Latin America.

Father Luzzi begins his study by quoting a very significant statement made by the Sacred Congregation of the Consistory in the