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The Uncommitted, by Reyes

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THE UNCOMMITTED. By Gracianus R. Reyes. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1986. 90 pages.

Gracianus Reyes is a virtual unknown on the Philippine literary scene. *The Uncommitted* is his first published work. The cover blurb says that he has written several other novels which were lost, and that he has a collection of short stories and another novel in manuscript form with New Day Publishers. Reyes is a graduate of St. Louis University in Baguio and has an M.S. in Sociology from the Asian Social Institute in Manila. The biographical note says that he has been a silversmith, teacher, researcher, farmer, free-lance writer and government employee. This varied background, perhaps, explains the mixed nature of this short and perplexing novel.

It is hard to classify the work as a genuine novel. It has the framework of a novel—a fairly good conflict, a curiously interesting main character, an intriguing narrator whom one would want to know more about, and a provoking, though undeveloped subplot. But it reads more like a sketchy outline of a novel still to be written out in detail. It suffers from lack of organization and is spoiled by a very contrived *deus ex machina* that is more sensational than organic to the story. The narrator herself calls the work a "mosaic" on the last page of the novel. And perhaps that is the best way to describe it—a moral mosaic.

The main plot is the story of Juan de la Cruz, "Johnny," who comes from Domalandan (*doma lan dalan*)—the "other road" or the "different road"—in Pangasinan. His philosophical stance forbids any serious commitment. "It's not easy for me to commit myself because committing myself is like biting something I can't swallow" (p. 34).

Nothing is indispensable and nothing can be so precious that one cannot part with it. To a mystic, detachment from persons and things can be healthy. But the degree to which Juan has grown detached borders on nihilism. (p. 9)

The narrator is Elena de los Santos. (I can't help thinking that the names of the two must have some special significance for Reyes.) Elena is an ex-nun, unmarried, thirty years old. She calls herself a spinster.

I kept my loneliness to myself. Although there were times when I felt miserable, I never showed signs of it. There were times when almost all the girls had a boyfriend [sic] and others were engaged and about to be married, and I thought myself as a spinster. . . . I knew and felt that I was getting left behind. (pp. 16-17)

The two meet at a cocktail party to open an exhibition of paintings and begin a relationship that is doomed from the start. Johnny shies away from all forms of commitment; Elena wants nothing but commitment. Elena wants marriage; Johnny wants nothing to do with the commitment that marriage

represents. Elena wants children; Johnny does not want the responsibility that they entail.

The relationship progresses through friendship and courtship. "He came regularly. I missed him when he didn't. In short, I fell in love with him" (p. 19). Finally, they decide to live together without benefit of marriage, Johnny eagerly, Elena reluctantly. After a year of living together, Johnny simply walks out on Elena. One suspects that he was frightened by the growing nature of the relationship and the ties it represents.

I want to be alone for awhile. . . . I am going away for awhile. Please don't . . . , he said when I was about to embrace him. He had raised the wall that separated him from me before that used to isolate him from the rest of the world . . . that massive wall of detachment I thought I had broken down, yet I could sense the weight of his emotions and it was breaking him. (p. 44)

They never meet again until Elena identifies Johnny's dead body in the morgue after an automobile accident.

The main plot has possibilities as a story of two people drawn together by need, yet doomed to tragedy because they are so basically different. There is an interesting use of the journey theme in Chapter VI after Johnny leaves Elena. She leaves the apartment on Montreal Street in Cubao and travels by bus and jeep through Manila (the symbol of her life?) to Quiapo and Makati and back to Farmer's Market and Cubao. In Makati she meets a group of nurses from Makati Medical Center on their way home and takes the bus with them to Cubao. Is this a symbol of the commitment that Elena has been seeking? But Reyes spoils the symbol by centering their conversation on the dangers of young women taking buses alone in Manila late at night. Or is this just an opportunity for another of Reyes's "sermons" on social conditions?

The use of the female narrator is interesting, though it makes it difficult to figure out whether the real hero of the novel is Johnny or Elena. Much of the novel is composed of Johnny's ideas, related in his conversation or in his writings which Elena finds in the apartment after he has left.

As I recall all this, I page through his folders and manuscripts, most of them unfinished or finished portions of long meandering pieces. They leave the reader nothing but a promise, but to me, they are more than just a promise—they are part and parcel of a whole being who has touched my life very deeply. (p. 11)

The novel would have been better if it had focused on Elena who seems far more human and real than Johnny. But in fact we learn little of her except by indirection in her reaction to Johnny's detachment.

The use of the narrator, however, does allow Reyes to gather together a "mosaic" of Johnny and his philosophy of life. Although they distract from the main plot line at times, there are interesting "sermons" by Johnny on everything under the sun—on sex, on having and raising children, on com-

mitment and responsibility, on Filipino writers like Nick Joaquin and NVM Gonzalez (he says that Gonzalez is not a great litterateur) and on the Filipino character.

Children are taught by their parents the *lagay* mentality. This means that they are taught bribery at an early age . . . What then when (he) grows up and becomes a public servant or official? He will be a good citizen of Ladrone Islands. (p. 76)

As a people we can't imagine anything permanent . . . human relations can't be permanent. (p. 70)

I must admit that for me these writings and opinions of Johnny make up the more interesting parts of the novel.

This is, indeed, a confusing piece of work. It is difficult for the reader to decide what Reyes is really up to. If one accepts the "moral mosaic" idea, then Reyes is preaching about commitment.

Emotions and passions are like tentacles seeking whom or which to cling to, not knowing that they bring the whole to perdition. And yet no particular object can be said to be the end-all of one's being. Why then should one follow his passions and emotions when he knows full well they are misleading? A great amount of detachment is necessary if one is to remain whole and unfettered. (p. 67)

But is Reyes saying that one would be like Johnny—uncommitted and detached? Or like Elena, desperately seeking commitment and failing to find it? Either choice, at least in the novel, leads to tragedy.

The subplot of Lily and Dado is a reversed mirror of the Johnny-Elena plot. Dado tries to escape commitment. When Lilly gets pregnant ("I was carried away," he says) Dado wants an abortion. But Elena talks him into marriage and accepting his responsibility. The marriage is planned for Christmas, but in the early morning before the wedding, Dado dies in the same accident that kills Johnny.

One other thought intrigues me in this novel. Is Reyes writing about the Filipino? Is Juan de la Cruz and his determination to avoid emotions and commitment a symbol for the Filipino? ("In truth it is a name which is considered by the large majority to be but a mere symbol signifying the Filipino race. . . ." [p. 5]). Some of the passages from Johnny's conversation and writing seem to support this interpretation.

Look at most Filipinos. Whenever they are confronted with problems, their first impulse is to move away. Rather than meet the problem headlong [sic], they try their best to avoid it. Can't you see why there are thousands and thousands of applicants for work abroad or for emigration? Can't you see why the so-called close family ties do not remain close for long? As a people we can't imagine anything to be permanent. . . . human relations can't be permanent. (p. 70)

If we accept that interpretation of the novel, Johnny and Elena are two sides of the Filipino (and human) character—one seeking commitment and the pain it brings, and the other avoiding it at all costs because of the suffering. Elena's longing is instinctual; Johnny's is rationalization hidden under the cover of a philosophy of life. Reyes never tells us which one is right and that, perhaps, is the point of this novel.

The Uncommitted is a book with great potential. It needs a larger canvas and more reflection, a clearer structure and more skill with language. The reader can only hope that Reyes will rewrite this little novelette into the novel that it can be. With the present text we have "nothing but a promise" (p. 11).

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