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Review Article

Leoncio Deriada's Road to Mawab: 1984-1988

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

THE ROAD TO MAWAB AND OTHER STORIES. By Leoncio Deriada. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1984. viii, 154 pages.

THE DOG EATERS AND OTHER PLAYS. By Leoncio Deriada. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1986. 120 pages.

NIGHT MARES AND OTHER STORIES OF FANTASY AND HORROR. By Leoncio Deriada. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1988. vi, 123 pages.

Leoncio Deriada is one of the bright, new voices in Philippine Writing in English. Although his works appeared in various periodicals as far back as the early seventies, they have been collected in book form only in the past five years when *Road to Mawab*, *The Dog Eaters* and *Night Mares* were all published by New Day. We thus have a representative collection of the works of Leoncio Deriada and an opportunity as well as a point of view from which to evaluate his work as a whole.

Deriada's credentials were established with a second place award in the inaugural *Asiaweek* Short Story Contest of 1981 which included stories from all the Southeast Asian countries. On the domestic scene he has received awards from the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Literary Contest and *Focus Magazine*. One of his stories has been translated into Chinese in Peking, and another has appeared in a German anthology. In 1984 he received an award of merit from the Writers Union of the Philippines. Peer recognition is not always infallible, but it is often an indication of competence.

Deriada's bio-data reads almost like a paradigm for the Filipino writer in English. He was born of tenant parents in the barrio of San Antonio, Barotac Viejo, Iloilo, but grew up on an abaca plantation in Ventura, Calinan District,

Davao City. He spent a good part of his youth exploring Tumugan Canyon and Mawab in Davao del Norte. This rural background is the setting for many of his stories and plays. He graduated from Davao City High School and was class valedictorian at the Ateneo de Davao in 1959. His M.A. is from Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro and his Ph.D. is from Silliman University in Dumaguete. He has taught literature at the Assumption College in Davao del Norte, the Ateneo de Davao, Silliman University and the University of the Philippines in the Visayas in Iloilo City. Like most Philippine writers in English, he is a literature teacher who writes literature. These two strands—his barrio roots and the academic world in which he teaches—provide the background for most of Deriada's writings. In a sense, he himself is the product and the symbol of the world of which he writes.

The "Acknowledgments" in *The Road to Mawab* and *The Dog Eaters* and the shorter "Preface" in *Night Mares* provide some interesting information on the background and the influences on Deriada, as well as a bit of an insight into his personality. The Formalist—New Criticism influence is clear in most of his works. He belongs to what Isagani Cruz has called the Ateneo-Silliman School, which is understandable enough since almost twenty years of Deriada's academic career have been spent at the Ateneo de Davao, Xavier University and Silliman University. (The last few years he has been a member of the Humanities Division at the University of the Philippines in the Visayas.) Symbolism, irony and crafted language are Deriada's strong points. The social message, although present, is muted and its impact is reflective, rather than a critical statement of protest. Deriada waves no flags, although his awareness of human and social inequities is profound.

THE ROAD TO MAWAB (1984)

The Road to Mawab, along with a ninety-page introduction and commentary was Deriada's Ph.D. dissertation at Silliman University. With one exception ("Night Mares" was in the top ten stories of the *Asiaweek* Short Story Contest in 1984) *The Road to Mawab* includes all of Deriada's award-winning short stories. These fourteen short stories, therefore, are a good sample of Deriada's work—of his talent with language and his remarkable gift for seeing the significant in the details of human living. *The Road to Mawab* makes it abundantly clear that Deriada is a remarkably perceptive and talented writer.

The theme of all the stories collected here is the conflict of old and new in Philippine society, of rural values thrown up against the inevitability of urbanization, of the changing customs of a new society imposed on those of an older, more traditional society. The result is often disillusionment and frustration, and in some cases death of either an individual, an ideal or a society. "The Coin Divers" is in many respects a flawed story, but it best exemplifies this theme of change and conflict. With more work it could have been the best story of the collection. Six of the stories are semi-autobiographical and the disillusionment of the growing protagonist is another variation on the theme of change.

The masterpiece of this collection is the title story—"The Road to Mawab"—where Deriada's talents are at their best. It is a story in which disillusionment has been gentled into understanding and acceptance. My other favorite in the collection is "A Woman in the War" where a child narrator reminds the reader of Manuel Arguilla, and where Deriada's perception of Filipino sensibility is at its best. "Daba-Daba" and "Ati-Atihan" (along with "The Coin Divers") are stories of tribal minorities caught in the disconcerting currents of modernization and urbanization. There is gently bitter nostalgia in these stories and it betrays Deriada's sympathy.

Some of the stories are what Sionil Jose called "lyrical and spontaneous," the pitfalls of the young writer. Some of them are over-written, and too trite and contrived. Deriada, like most Filipino writers in English, is infatuated with symbolism. Ten of the stories end with a neat symbol for the reader to carry away with him. In "The Road to Mawab" that symbolism is muted and better controlled, but in "Lunacy," "The Loneliness of a Linotypist" and "Pigpen," for example, the contrived symbolism destroys the story. Deriada's style is sometimes too cute (he describes two young lovers as "gangling and goggled and grim") and a good editor could have smoothed out the lapses in English idiom (e.g. "Mother pointed to her the water jar" and one character earns a job by "perfecting a spelling test" when Deriada means the character got a perfect mark in the test). But these are the minor flaws of an emerging writer.

THE DOG EATERS (1986)

The Dog Eaters is a less successful collection, for Deriada is more of a short story writer than a dramatist. The seven plays included are competent enough. There is always a good plot and challenging characterization in a Deriada opus. But they don't always seem to work as drama. The reader cannot escape the suspicion that the plays are really short stories in disguise.

To support this view, the reader might make a comparison of the short story "The Dog Eaters," in the *The Road to Mawab*, and the dramatic version in *The Dog Eaters*. The short story is clearly superior for it gives the author a chance to impose his own comments and point of view. The dramatic version is too abrupt and too harsh. Because the author in the play has not allowed himself to get between the audience and the drama on the stage, the play seems less satisfactory.

Other comparisons of a similar nature might be made. "Phone Pal From Selga Street" in *Night Mares* was originally a one-act play. Although I have not seen the text of the play, I suspect that the nature of this story, dependent as it is on a number of telephone conversations, might work better as a play. The author also indicates that "The Dog Eaters" is only the first act of a three-act play. Since I have not seen the text of the three-act play it is also difficult to judge whether the play works better in a three-act version or as a short story. ("The Riddle of the Sphinx" certainly does work better in a three-act version.)

"Twilight For the Witches" was also originally a short story. But a comparison of the two texts—play and short story—would be unfair since the short story was written by Virgilio Samonte under the title "The Other Woman."

All that these comparisons tend to indicate, perhaps, is that at this stage in his writing career Deriada's published short stories are better than his published plays.

Deriada's dialogue often describes rather than presents. Perhaps the fault lies in the fact that the plays do not present a "moment of crisis" but rather portray the action from beginning to end, and leave little to the dramatic imagination of the audience. Deriada's strength is language—descriptive as well as narrative. His stories often take life because of the presence of the author and the omniscient narrator, which often spoils the dramatic power of "characters in action." Thus the plays seem to suffer in comparison with the short stories.

The six one act plays in the collection all deal with death, are sharply satiric and center around a single governing symbol. "Abattoir" juxtaposes human and animal life, as does "The Dog Eaters." Both are satiric comments on the value of human life. "My Daughter is a Nurse in the United States" is one of the best of the one-act plays. It deals subtly with the theme of US immigration, but is too short to deal with the complexity of the theme adequately. Aling Petrona and Mang Severo need more elbow room to be presented as fully rounded characters. The conflicts in their marriage are the real conflict in the play, but get lost in the hurried pace of the drama. "Airport on Mactan Island" returns to Deriada's favorite theme of rural primitivism and modern industrialization. "The Ocean in the Conch" also reads like a short story. "Twilight For the Witches" is a dramatization of a short story by Virgilio Samonte in *The Free Press*.

Deriada's one-act plays fail, I think, because he has not focused on a single dramatic incident. The plots are too complex to be satisfactorily portrayed within the framework of a one-act play. All of them are complicated by the fact that there is no single main character, no single conflict.

Deriada's masterpiece is the one three-act play in the collection—"The Riddle of the Sphinx." Here Deriada's dramatic talent is shown to better advantage because he has chosen to focus on just two characters—Man and Woman. He has more latitude to work with and his talents as a writer have more opportunity to emerge. The result is a remarkably successful piece of writing.

The theme is the riddle of the Sphinx: "What walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?" The answer is MAN, and that is what the play is all about. The dialogue almost literally sparkles, and the insights are profound. The satire is pointed but gentle. What silly fools we are, the play says, how noble in aspiration, how pedestrian in action. It is a profound reflection upon the meaning of man—of man and woman and love.

And it works. I remember listening to a dramatic reading of Act II (The Lovers) at Silliman University with the author as the Young Man and Rowena Tiempo as The Young Woman. It worked dramatically. The audience was

touched with the ironic pathos of the two young people, and their empty nakedness under the facade of sophisticated and clever language.

NIGHT MARES (1988)

Night Mares is Deriada's second collection of published fiction. The self-imposed theme of "fantasy and horror" limits the range of the stories and narrows, I think, the scope of Deriada's talent. Three of the stories are not really horror or fantasy. "Phone Pal from Padre Selga Street" was originally a play and is really a detective story that loses its impact in the translation from play to short story. "Wood" from the pre-martial law *Philippine Free Press* is a social story of class conflict typical of much of Philippine writing in the sixties. "'Twas Brillig," the best story of the collection, is an intellectual *tour de force* of literary wit and really does not fit the theme of horror and fantasy which Deriada sets for himself in this collection.

The other nine stories are a mixture of Philippine folk tales and ancient myths, which are sometimes incongruously set in a Philippine context. "Tree of Terror" is probably Indian in origin with an overlay of the Philippine myth of the balet tree. "Tartanilya" is a neat little retelling of the *engkanto* tale of Philippine folklore. "Mother and Child," "The Invitation," "Flesh of Marble," and "Night Mares" are more classic in origin. "Mother and Child" is beautifully contextualized in rural Philippines, but the other three strike a somewhat jarring note when Deriada tries to adapt them to the Philippine scene. "The Hunt" and perhaps "Mother and Child" come closest to being stories of genuine horror.

The best story in the collection is undoubtedly "'Twas Brillig." It is a tongue in cheek story of the *kapre* of Asian mythology which Deriada sets in the framework of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* and the tale of Jack and the Beanstalk. The *kapre* is a kind of Jolly Green Giant. Yet there is more to the story than just a piece of clever and witty writing. It really is a myth within a myth, especially for anyone familiar with Philippine colonial history. The *kapre* wears red, white and blue jockey shorts with a field of stars, and bleeds gold and silver coins when wounded. He is overcome finally by *bagoong*, the fermented fish sauce much loved by Filipinos and detested by Americans. What we have in this story, I believe, is more than just a tale of fantasy. It is, perhaps, a new myth of the Filipino's triumph over colonial oppressors. It is one of the best pieces of writing that Deriada has done to the present.

CONCLUSION

Deriada is a writer to be reckoned with in Philippine writing in English. "The Road to Mawab," "'Twas Brillig" and "The Riddle of the Sphinx" are masterpieces in their own right and a promise of the work to come. We might conclude this Review Article with four comments by way of summary of Deriada's work.

First, Deriada's strength is his wit. I use the term in the seventeenth century sense, as the ability to perceive the ironic contrast in the juxtaposition of apparently contradictory ideas. Deriada has a writer's eye for those disturbing human contradictions and ironies. He is also a deeply sympathetic human being. He knows how to care. His language, which is his strength, is pointed and sharp enough to pierce the masks that people wear, and the complications that hide so much of human life. When Deriada is at his best, as in "The Riddle of the Sphinx," his language carries, easily and painlessly, the burden of his theme. Deriada's language often reminds the reader of Shaw or Wilde, as his wit is reminiscent of the eighteenth century dramatists, Sheridan, Congreve and Goldsmith. More than one critic has pointed out that Philippine contemporary society, with its ostentation and hypocrisy, needs the satiric wit of dramatists like Congreve or Shaw or Wilde.

Secondly, one might comment on the frequent resemblance of Deriada to Manuel Arguilla. Some of Deriada's best stories are those which deal with the native tradition or with what used to be called local color. "Summer in Ventura," "The Road to Mawab," "A Woman in the War," and "Daba Daba" are clearly Arguillan. "The Day of the Locusts," "The Coin Divers" and "Ati-Atihan" deal with the more profoundly social themes of rural society and minority peoples that attracted Arguilla. The comparison is made complete with Deriada's "The Loneliness of a Linotypist" which is so reminiscent of Arguilla's "Caps and Lower Case."

In the "Introduction" to *The Road to Mawab*, F. Sionil Jose comments that "Teachers of literature who write fiction have a tendency to write for other teachers of literature." The comment is valid to a certain extent for Deriada. It is most obvious in his use of symbols. Like many writers brought up on western models, especially those upheld by the New Critics, Deriada's use of symbols is sometimes too strained and obvious (e.g., the dolls in "My Daughter is a Nurse in the United States" and the Atlas statue in "Flesh of Marble." But when his symbolism is less overt, as in "'Twas Brillig," the horses in "Night Mares," the Oedipus myth in "The Riddle of the Sphinx" and the airport in "Airport on Mactan Island," it works magnificently.

Finally, Deriada is a "moralist." Like all great writers he has a message of more than human significance. His theme sometimes degenerates into preaching, but in his better pieces ("The Riddle of the Sphinx," "The Road to Mawab," "A Woman in the War" and "'Twas Brillig") the fusion of thought and structure carries the moral effortlessly and well. His failure to this point is that he sometimes complicates the simplicity, both of life and of his writing, with complications that blur the over-all effect of what he is trying to say.

Deriada's talent and potential are apparent in these three small collections of his work, although it is still to come to full maturity. Deriada says that he is working on a novel, which should give him the opportunity to display his talent to full advantage. Philippine writing in English can look forward to more good writing from this talented writer. At the moment, he is still maturing, still struggling to find his authentic voice and style.