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Dinstances: In Time

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Book Reviews

DISTANCES: IN TIME. By Bienvenido Santos. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1983. 67 pages.

One familiar with Bienvenido Santos, the fictionist, is no longer stranger to his recurrent themes of alienation, dislocation, sense of rejection, dissociation, or to his heart-wrenching treks to the past to rediscover one's roots. The pervasive tone here in *Distances: In Time*, a collection of thirty-three poems, is expectedly one of nostalgia, therefore, sadness. Remembering past pleasures, one's "first fine careless raptures," is always sad, aware as one is that these can never be recaptured since the past is irretrievable, bespeaking unbridged distances in time. Remembering grief is likewise unpleasant, since the emotion is recreated. And so the music carries sad ripples and undertows through steadily glistening billows.

"Intimidations" sets the solemn initial chords, even as it attempts reprieves from pain; "Intimates" intensifies this mood of a futile reaching out, and "Intermediaries" fails to provide the saving, celebrating finale.

It is sorrow, subtly diffused in different keys, but not pessimism; certainly, never pessimism which is a negation of life. Here is sorrow that springs from the poet's truth, that lies at the very core of the poet's own truth. For only in a brief moment may distances in time and even space close in, and only because of the poet's gift of self-deception, the poet's latching on to his own self-professed truths either as betrayed or activated, whichever would help him in his definition of his own personal world. In a big and vital way, part of this gift lies in the poet's capacity for not minding this distinction between what is real and what is merely continuing mirage. Something like a momentary suspension of personal disbelief; this time, in himself, and not just in his readers.

And, so, in "Intimidations," through leis hanging loose around his neck, he hoards kisses to tide him over long after the leis have wilted, and ghosts start to hurt. As if they could help at all.

In the islands he saw his own
 before exile swimming in liquid sunshine
 leis hung loose around his neck
 wherever he stopped to say a few words
 defining his wonder. (p. 31)

The past's intrusion into the present is smooth sailing, but only for a while. Even masks may run askew, and paints gash like a wound in these painful rites of passage from present to past, and back, and from self-deception to heightened sense of awareness and ever back. In between these rites, the poet goes through the intimate act of seeking and finding, working out new combinations in a blaze of new minted poetry, using words that have no season.

"Intimates" simulates the young and fresh experience of love and here the note of futility runs almost strident, like the sound of an untuned violin. "Intermediaries" is hardly celebration even in a game poets play best, this singing of self, momentary stay to pain. However, in the next breath, the impending fears gain poignancy as the poet speaks of men with dreams but with no identity, "Homeless men gathering dust and echoes of lost days/that lightly fall by doors they need not pass again" (p. 54). Between the past and the now and here is a drawbridge, yes, but the moat becomes a perpetual dividing line between one age that is dead and another soon to die.

Santos' tropes are rituals of dying houses, bright-eyed and painted clowns, seagulls (reminiscent of Tu fu's, wheeling direction-less low-flying birds suspended between heaven and earth), night parties, all in a metaphorical whirl of time in the midst of illusive arrests in the poet's endless search for blinding epiphanies.

Santos takes on manifold roles, the clown, ("the bells around their feet/are a tangle of sounds/crying enough enough" [p. 21]), wayfarer, party-goer, correspondent, violinist, lover ("atoning for sins of emission" [p. 35], philatelist ("the stamps have become a blur of colors/faces, flowers, monuments/under the postmark bearing the names of cities/and hints of the growing distance" [p. 55])).

Time pushes memory away. But the poet pulls it back and the push-pull tension informs his creative art when he "unplugs all those gadgets of sound and swims in the stillness of time" (p. 26). Suddenly, distinctions between the past and the present need not be absolute. For love can alter seasons.

But then, love, like poems can die of old age ("my poems are dying of old age/get out in the sun I urge them" [p. 23]) unless the poet keeps on salvaging revitalizing truths out of time and experience, like a junkman working on discarded heaps and scraps of memories that litter the backyard of the mind, turning them to yellow gold in the moonlight.

The reader sees Santos of *You Lovely People*, *Brother My Brother*, *The Day the Dancers Came*, and *Scent of Apples*, all over again in the pages of

this, his second book of poetry, published twenty-five long years after his first, *The Wounded Stag*; stories of pain all, this time strictured through the confining structure of poetry, and through his usual sense of irony and control, in a cool (not cold), calm and collected craft.

Are Santos' poems dying of old age? I do not smell any reek of impending death. Perhaps a leanness, but never an enervation of subject. But what narrow scope he works in, he masters with his usual wary use of the language and sense of discipline. Again, ripeness may not be all . . . but surely in art, it is essential.

Poets, like old soldiers, never die. They just, perhaps, fade away, and only in a country where the tedium of listening to a poet's heart and private truths has reached its limit of endurance. And even when that inauspicious time comes—if it hasn't already—the poets, the likes of Santos, will refuse to die. They are simply banished from the earth, like a "great plague."

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AMA. By Lazaro Francisco. Quezon City: Manlapaz Publishing Co., 1982. 203 pages.

MAGANDA PA ANG DAIGDIG. By Lazaro Francisco. Quezon City; Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1982. viii, 296 pages.

Among the novelists who wrote in Pilipino, Lazaro Francisco easily stood out as one of the few who viewed the world from a definite moral perspective. Like most of his contemporaries, Francisco had his first works published serially in *Liwayway* in the 1920s. Like such popular writers as Fausto J. Galauran and Antonio Sempio, among others, Francisco wrote a number of novels which appealed to the taste of the ordinary reader, who by the 1930s had already become accustomed to conventionalized ways of exploring reality through the novels. Thus the materials and techniques of Francisco's *Sa Paanan ng Krus* (1937) and *Deo* (1925) had become familiar to the readers of *Liwayway*. The world they depicted was narrow, limited to the confines of familial relationships. It was in his other novels that Francisco widened the parameters of his discourse as he took on themes and structures which the more personal writings could not contain.

Two of Francisco's more social novels—*Ama* and *Maganda Pa ang Daigdig*—have recently been published, this time in book form, making accessible to the contemporary reader novels acclaimed for their realistic portrayal of agrarian society. A number of critics have shown how Francisco's choice of sub-