

Christ". No matter what their subject, no matter what their theme, inevitably and as surely as the sun will rise in the East tomorrow, sooner or later, "God, Lord, Thee or Him" or some more indirect, less obvious but no less ambiguous words as "Truth, Goodness" creep in. Without denying the value of "God and all" as Holden Caulfield would, one senses that all these are but broken records. Where is the high spirit, the new idea youth is supposed to represent? What's new with this brew?

The opposite school of thought, for want of a better subject, is an unabashed celebration of a goddess called "love", or what Norman Mailer crudely termed as "the Bitch". While their unashamed incantations of love are in line with their numerical age and their biological status as puberty emergent, their songs are but repetitious tired old sayings, or worse, an evocation of an old hag wearing new clothes. Worse still, since most of these would-be lovers have yet to experience what love is, they cannot speak with the authority only experience can give. Inevitably the products of these "love poem" factories are fake sentiments, bogus emotions and cliché-ridden sweet nothings which any one more familiar with life can recognize at first sight as "phony".

Essayist are mostly frustrated poets. Since they realize their lack of poetic gift and experience and fancy, they have to aim for a more common bird. Like their contemporaries of the higher life, these essayists are engaged in a vain search for a subject. Not knowing what to do with their limited ability and unlimited energy, and knowing their own ambition to go into history as sages and prophets of the New Jerusalem, they are torned between Reason and Impulse. With the easy simplification of youth, they would assume an all-knowing attitude and issue manifestos of new philosophies which are in reality mere rehearsals of Existentialism and proclaim new theories of criticism which are in reality old asides of F. R. Leavis. These smart-alecky self-appointed shrew birds in the know can produce only unrealized ideas and infectious disorder. After all, who can say he has all the answers to all the questions of life except God?

Without a subject to divide them into camps, essayists differ only in style. Those who seek originality often confuse it with subjectivity; they uncork their minds and pour their heads out, letting their words go rambling on and on without the least knowledge of what they are saying or where they are leading to. These adventurers into confusion just cannot expect anyone except their sweethearts to read them.

Those who do not seek originality often confuse it with conformity; they

package their papers and snip, clip their term papers and presto; an essay. More often than not, these stereo-type features do not rise above the level of most daily journalism, who are famous for their 5W and notorious for their wrong spellings and erroneous grammar. Of course, dull formula can only produce dull writing, which is not much better than no writing at all.

The plight of the essayist are best seen in the editorial pages of most students' magazines. There the supposedly hard hitting editorials are written by timid souls with the most cautious hands. They seem afraid of offending anyone except man-eating barracudas which can be criticized without harming any sensitive souls. Otherwise, they are as timid as a new born baby.

The short story writers can best strike a happy balance between imagination and control. Their medium permits them a freedom bordering on the poet's which is a most difficult freedom and requires the control approximating the essayists' which is resultant indeed. Loquacity, a vice in essay, can be transform into "a stream of consciousness", a virtue in short story. Free ranging imagination, disastrous for essays, can help bolster the coat of symbolism all modern short stories would not be caught dead without.

Young short story writers, like their counterparts in other mediums, suffer from a want of experience. With their fondness for new adventures and exotic shores, it is not seldom that one with transported into the most distant shores. But once the reader's bearing is found, the whole thing creaks. Brooklyn mothers often speak with Texas accen's while New York Taxi drivers often talk as if they are fresh out of Harvard, all with the most impeccable grammar and restraint.

Youthfulness can also harm these portraits of life. Human nature is apt to suffer under the hands of these star-seeing writers. An often overheard comment is: "It doesn't happen like this." Characterization is apt to be thin and flat, and what should be living, breathing individuals emerge as dead and easily forgotten types.

Despite their shortcomings, the young writers are a talented lot. They are also a hard working and fast learning bunch. With more gray hairs in their head, and a few more years of careful "aging", they give promise of rising from the mud produced by today's "word merchants". Promises, of course, can always go unkept. But one can always hope they will not go to the dogs and like their elders produce again a lot of "sound and fury signifying nothing".

— END —

MINDORENOS have every reason to straighten their shoulders, jut out their chins and breathe deeply with a sense of pride. For standing in the front phalanx of Filipino writers in English, both with regard to quantity and quality of work produced, is one of Mindoro's sons, N. V. M. González. According to Roseburg, "he more than any other Filipino writer, has demonstrated the fact that a Filipino, though writing in English, can nevertheless convincingly convey the soul and sentiment of his people without losing any indigenous characteristic."<sup>1</sup> And the people González writes about are the Mindorenos; the place, Mindoro. Leonard Caspar predicts that N. V. M. González' works, together with those of Bienvenido Santos "with their complementary images of different countries of experience that can be called Filipino," will be read, studied and discussed for a long, long time in the future.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.

The early saga of González is most interesting especially in view of the lofty position of eminence he has risen to in Filipino letters. How easy it is to picture the young teen-age González tramping from the barrio to the post office where as Roseburg tells us: "he would type the manuscript before mailing it and then after a few weeks of impatient waiting walk the same distance again only to receive rejection slips."<sup>3</sup> The initials of González stand for Néstor Vicente Madali, and he has stuck to using only the initials since the day his mother first recommended that he use them

# THE MIND

by

John McSherry, SVD

with a story and it subsequently happened that this story, *Awakening*, was accepted by the *Graphic* for publication, his very first. He was then 16 years old, having been born in 1915. His father had been a supervising teacher who had moved his family from Romblón, Romblón, to take up a pioneering way of life in Mindoro during González' early boyhood. The previous position of his father in Romblón explain why, in one of his stories, González presents a young lad who is the main narrator of the story and whose father was also formerly a supervisor.



**The Filipino, though writing in English can nevertheless convincingly convey the soul and sentiment of his people.**

the bones of a public figure who prefers to remain in the background, it helps to know something of the place about which he writes.

2.

Mindoro, where González hails from and which is interwoven so intimately in the texture of practically all his books, is a fascinatingly beautiful land. Seventh largest of the islands of the Philippines, it is split up and down its center by a spine of high mountains. Halcón in the north and Baco mountain in the south, two of the largest mountains in the Philippines, stand like attentive sentries. The outer rim of lowlands which encircle Mindoro is carpeted with rice lands, coconuts and grazing areas for cattle. In comparison to the rest of the Philippines, Mindoro is sparsely populated with less than 400,000 people. It is a land whose potential has still to be realized. It is perhaps, a land of the future.

Mindoro's name may bespeak this future hope, yet it is more connected to the romantic history of the past. "Mina de oro" means mine of gold. In the *Atlas of the Philippines*, we read the fol-

# ORO OF N.V.M. GONZÁLEZ

After finishing high school in Mindoro, González proceeded to Manila to study law but soon grew disillusioned since he could not focus his mind's attention on his law books. His heart was elsewhere. So he went to work for the *Graphic* where he remained for six years. After that he has devoted himself mainly to the field of creative writing. Currently, he teaches Writing at the University of the Philippines. He has won many awards for his writing, the first being a special award in the 1940 Commonwealth Literary Contests. After that, he was recipient of the Republic Award of Merit in 1954 and more recently the Cultural Heritage Award in 1960. He studied abroad under the auspices of a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship award and has likewise traveled extensively.

These statistics of the man present

to us his public figure which, for the more interested, seem so insipid and dry. Like many authors, González prefers to harbor his private life from the glare of publicity and fanfare, preferring to let his works speak for him. And if the reader is assiduous enough, he will find in the stories and other literary pieces the very soul of the author himself. And as is so often the case, the soul of the man is rooted and grounded in a particular locality, a particular region whose influence permeates the lives of the characters he writes about. This is especially true of N.V.M. González. He writes of his native place, Mindoro, with a sense of reverence. And so it is, in fact, that his first work, *Winds of April*, tells about a child's enlarging world as the family moves from Romblón to the frontiers of Mindoro.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in order to put some flesh on

lowing concerning the history of Mindoro:

"The Chinese brought their sampans to the mouths of the rivers and traded their merchandise for forest products. The first Spaniards to explore the island were Juan de Salcedo and Martín de Goiti, who had been dispatched by the Adelantado Legazpi to Luzón upon hearing that here was a palisaded city at the mouth of the Pasig River. Legazpi himself visited Mindoro as he transferred the seat of his government from Cebú to Luzón.

"The island suffered heavily from piratical raids by the Moslems, who established two strong holds on the island: Mamburao and Balete. Entire settlements were abandoned. In 1636, Tagal, brother of the Sultan of Mindanao, gathered a large fleet recruited from Mindanao, Joló and Borneo. He cruised along the Visayas and Mindoro, ravaging the coastal towns and 660 persons, among them

were 3 friars. Toward the end of the Spanish rule however, peace was achieved and the towns on the coastal region began to be developed.<sup>6</sup>

And so this land which was called "Ma-I" by the Chinese already in the thirteenth century,<sup>6</sup> whose coastline has been immortalized in Philippine history by the "La Naval de Manila" and in fiction by Nick Joaquín's "The Legend of the Dying Wanton",<sup>7</sup> is the stuff of Mindoro's yester year. Today Mindoro flexes its muscles pushing ahead with 20th century growth trying to catch up to the economic development of the rest of the Philippines. Today the eastern portion of Mindoro has been developed, whereas the western side is still pioneer country and has been described by many to be similar to the American Old West. There are vast lands there waiting to be developed. A population explosion is going on due to the influx of immigrants. Since 1948, there has been a 95% increase in population.<sup>8</sup> Mindoro is thus in many ways a land of the future.

González' Mindoro is but one small sliver of this vast panorama of Mindoro's past, but a very important one. His Mindoro is the land of his childhood, of his youth. We might pigeon-hole this period as time between the First World War until about the time of the Great Depression in the thirties. It was the time when the American Occupation was really taking hold in the Philippines. And Mindoro was then just waking up from its sleep of centuries. It was a time when the shy Mangyans, who fled from the encroachments of civilization, lived more in the lowlands and close to the few towns rather than hiding away in the mountains. It was the time when the tamaraw was plentiful and the Mindoreño did not have to go to the Manila Zoo to see an example of Mindoro's pride of wildlife. And yet González' Mindoro is even beyond the barrio. It is in the kaingins and its life is mostly the life of the kainginero. It is a place where people "live in a land of neither clocks nor calendars but only almanacs marked with the seasons of seedtime, caretaking and harvest."<sup>9</sup> It is a slice of life so unique that it prompted the cultural anthropologist, Dr. Donn V. Hart, in a symposium sponsored by the Writer's Club of the University of the Philippines back in the late 1950's, to express great concern about what he considered the primitive conditions, the total absence of church or school from the life of the kaingin folk", depicted in González' then recently published *Season of Grace*.<sup>10</sup>

There is a very strong resemblance between González' Mindoro kainginero and Steinbeck's "Oakie" as portrayed in the *Grapes of Wrath*. The reaction of

both groups to life is so fundamental, human and dignified that one would almost think they were of the same stock. But delving deeper into the resemblance, one finds a striking dissimilarity which perhaps is the key to a proper understanding of González. And it is this. Steinbeck's "Oakies" struggled against an abstract force which was greater than themselves and which never succeeded in crushing their human spirit. But this abstract force was created by man, the reigning powers and cliques of powerful men who in their drive to consolidate and mechanize the vast land holdings did so without any thought or feeling for the humans who consequently suffered thereby. The Mindoro kainginero is also subjected to an abstract force, but in his case it is not one deriving so much from human connivance, but rather from the forces of nature. And yet the astonishing factor to be noted is that although there is every implication of a war, a battle and a skirmish with nature, the kainginero seems to survive, to come out ahead by joining himself with the opposite camp, in this case, with the forces of nature, by immersing himself so completely in the texture of nature's cycles that it is precisely this that helps him in the end to preserve, after all, his own individual dignity and identity.

This particular interlocking of the human spirit with nature which is so evidenced in González' books and which is somewhat subliminally presented is aptly articulated by comparing it to a description of Australia in Eleanor Dark's book *The Timeless Land*:

"Here it was as if the pulse of life in plant and beast and man has slowed almost to immobility, talking its beat from the land itself, which had all eternity in which to change. Here life was marooned and Time, like a slowly turning wheel, was only night and day, summer and winter, birth and death, the ebb and swell of tides. Nothing showed for the passing of ages but a minutely changing coastline, and infinitesimal wearing away of mountains, a well barely discernible lifting of coral reefs..."

And with all of this in mind, it might be asked then: "Well, if it is these qualities of the human spirit that make the kainginero of González similar to the 'Oakies' of Steinbeck, what difference does it make that these people are inhabitants of Mindoro?" The Mindoreño can feel proud, after all, to think that he lives at the very font, that he is able to breathe the same air and view the same exquisite mountains and coastlines that have been a factor in producing such noble human qualities. For it cannot be denied that a man's environment has an impact on what he is. And the closer a man lives to the forces of nature in a particular area, the closer it becomes, in a sense, part of him. And so although it can be said

## THE AUTHOR



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that the kainginero of González so shares the universal qualities of human spirit that he can be compared to man in any place and at any time, still there has to be something unique about him by the very fact that he lives, loves and dies in Mindoro.

### 3.

This then in a general sense is González kainginero of Mindoro. But in order to get a well rounded picture of what they are truly like, they must be examined closer yet, their values, their outlook on life as portrayed to us by the author. First of all, they are not stereotypes; a pitfall into which some authors are inclined to fall for sake, perhaps, of an audience. "González' characters are believable, a race of common men, without being reduced to the usual (for-export-only) stereotyped lovers of "tuba" and cockfights, and haters of spinster chaperons."<sup>12</sup> And equally important with this fact, is the idea that these Mindoro kainginero are also not innocents in the sense that they are "the happy savages of Rousseau's sanitary jungles".<sup>13</sup> Hardship, suffering, hunger and want are an intimate part of their lives — and this does not surprise them. More than that, they are truly children of the "ash-covered loam". For the destruction is of their own making, perhaps even a wanton leeching of the earth of its rich forests, thus preparing the land for the ravishing by water and flood.

Another factor that further delineates González' characters is their massive resignation to their way of life. Indeed, concerned people may rightly and

justly worry about the social injustice that the kainginerio is victim of in view of the fact that Mindoro is only a half-hour away from Manila by plane. It must be remembered though that even today the distance to the world of Manila by land sea for a poor man may be two or three days. But far, far greater is the psychological jump from that plot of land somewhere in the mountains of Mindoro to Roxas Boulevard in Manila. The life of these people has not kept pace with the growth and development of the modern world; we might say they didn't even know what they were missing because of the simplicity of their isolated world. But then in the face of their towering resignation and simplicity of life, who really is missing out — they or the habitué of the sophisticated, cosmopolitan city?

Allied to this spirit of resignation, is the capacity of the kainginerio for suffering — suffering that is quietly, unostentatiously taken in stride. González has been often acknowledged by critics for his restraint, for his lack of melodrama. And although the trials, troubles and tribulations of his folk are enumerated with an almost journalistic, clinical coldness, it is precisely this quality that leaves the reader breathless in the sight of so much common-sense knowledge of how to suffer, which is truly a part of wisdom. For these kainginerios, there is so much hunger, so much want, so much physical deprivation. But they are not overcome. They endure. They triumph — with dignity. There is Marta in "The Morning Star" from González' *Children of the Ash-Covered Loam*:

"She blames no one for the fact that she is about to bear an illegitimate child in a strange wilderness, with its father irretrievably beyond their reach. Instead, she accepts the company and comfort of an old sailor and a mute, so that her pain and even the loss of the child are bearable. . . . Marta, however, physically unlovely, is morally attractive for having endured so well the full human burden."

As Leonard Casper has so aptly and beautifully expressed it, "Love does not prevent suffering. It only seals off complaint."<sup>14</sup>

Intimately connected with this quality of resignation and spirit of quiet suffering is the deep, almost imperceptible current of religious faith that unites these two qualities into a chalice offering of worship of God. The point might be argued. But one cannot deny that these people do have an awareness, though permeated with superstition, of God. And it is this that makes them able to be resigned and able to suffer. It is so true that "institutionalized religion is so remote. . . . that the figures of saints function chiefly as a display of social status; and the church building is swept out, at the last moment, only in time for funeral. . . . yet grace. . . is everywhere present, even transfiguring super-

stition through the innocence of the believers' faith; grace is a religious underlay, the wine in human blood."<sup>16</sup>

And most interesting concerning the religious beliefs of these people is the comparison that one can make to "the intense and corrupt Church-goers of a Joaquín";<sup>10</sup> people of simple faith with a trust and confidence in Divine Providence as contrasted with those who live a life of "formal" religion but leave themselves open to despair, hopelessness and suicide.

This then, though inadequately and expressed, is the "Mindoro of González" and the "Mindoreño" as depicted by him in most of his works. And we may now ask ourselves and seek to find out what the critics say in appraisal of González' literary attempts.

#### 4.

"In defense of González' stories, Francisco Arcellana has explained how to appreciate his art. He says that the art of González' is never to sacrifice pattern for strength, never to lose one's purpose but to take every care to make out of something ordinary a beautiful thing.

There is no other statement in the entire body of his work that more clearly and adequately expresses his particular and singular belief. It is the foundation of his artistic faith. The terms of the faith are first, that art is a working with material, a skill, a craft; second, that art should be purposive; and third, that art is the making of a beautiful thing."<sup>17</sup>

In *Philippine Studies*, Fr. Miguel Bernad, S.J., has the following to say about González' *Season of Grace*:

"This is a remarkable book — somewhat tiresome on first reading, fascinating on second, and on third reading (if one has good sense to attempt a third) enchanting. The third reading should be done by parts, dipping into the book now and then, and skipping whole sections that do not merit a third reading. And thereby hangs a tale: for N.V.M. González is a splendid writer of parts; he is less successful in dealing with wholes. . . . It would be a mistake to look for a story in this novel. . . . It is not the story which is worth reading but the incidents that make up the story and what is generally called almost 'total recall' . . . This is a beautiful story. It is a truly Filipino story, simply and beautifully told. That is why it is fascinating on the second reading and

enchanting on the third. It is more than enchanting; it is moving."<sup>18</sup>

The general over-all appraisal of Leonard Casper was noted at the beginning of this paper. All of these critiques mentioned are very positive, almost in the superlative sense. Yet each one of these critics will at the same time take issue with certain aspects and points of González' work. Perhaps the device that González uses in an attempt to render the dialect into English by use of very simple almost repetitious style is the one element that has been most questioned by the critics. Surprisingly, though, one of the most negative criticisms of González that I have come across is an article in *Sands and Coral* by Lillian Bayron, an English Instructor at Silliman University.

"Most of the bucolic stories of González are plotless for they are mere sketches of life in the remotest regions of Mindoro or in some obscure barrio. Most of the stories in his book *Seven Hills Away* do not have specific plots and on the surface, it seems as if nothing very much happens — . . . but somehow his beautiful passages and this stilted manner of speaking are inconsistent and irreconcilable with one another."<sup>10</sup>

With regards to my own personal opinion, perhaps from the outset I would have to confess to being somewhat biased in the sense that I have found the works of González most rewarding due to the fact that he writes about territory where I live and in which I am most interested. This bias would be evident, I suppose, by the very fact that I chose the particular topic for this paper as well as by my choice of quoted material of the critics as cited above.

The title of González' book of short stories *Look, Stranger, on this Island Now* is an invitation to José Rizal, who, shortly before his death, stopped at the port of Romblon and perhaps immortalized the place with the following comment: "The port is lovely, but sad and solitary". So González invites Rizal to revisit the town once again and possibly reconsider the changed and changing Philippine Society. In the same spirit, but referring to Mindoro, I summon N.V.M. González "to look on this island now."

- 1 Arturo G. Roseburg, *Pathways to Philippine Literature in English* (Quezon City, Philippines: Phoenix Press, Inc., 1968) p. 162.
- 2 Leonard Casper, *The Wayward Horizon* (Sta. Ana, Manila: Community Publishers, Inc., 1961) p. 86.
- 3 Roseburg op. cit., p. 148.
- 4 Leonard Casper, *The Wounded Diamond* (Manila: Philippines Bookmark, 1964), p. 23.
- 5 Henry-Doran-Malay, *Atlas of the Philippines* (Manila: Phil-Asian Publishers, 1960), pp. 135-136.
- 6 H. dela Costa, S.J., *Readings in Philippine History* (Manila: Bookmark, 1966), p. 10.
- 7 Nick Joaquin, *Prose and Poems*, with an Introduction by Theodore M. Locsin (Manila: Graphic House, 1952), pp. 48 ff.
- 8 Remiglon Appalo, *Pandanggo sa Ilaw: The Politics of Occidental Mindoro* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1966), p. 26.
- 9 Leonard Casper, op. cit., p. 27.
- 10 Miguel A. Bernad, S.J., *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree* (Manila: Bookmark, 1961), p. 51.
- 11 Leonard Casper, *The Wayward Horizon* (Sta. Ana, Manila: Community Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 83.
- 12 Leonard Casper, *The Wounded Diamond* (Manila: Bookmark, 1964), p. 26.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 14 Casper, op. cit., p. 26.
- 15 Casper, op. cit., p. 29.
- 16 Araceli Zapanta, *A Comparative Study of the Women Characters in the Works of Fiction of Nick Joaquin and N.V.M. Gonzalez* (Cebu City: University of San Carlos, 1966), p. 92.
- 17 Miguel A. Bernad, "González' Season of Grace," *Philippine Studies*, p. 342, September, 1967.
- 18 Lillian R. Bayron, "A Comparative Study of the Bucolic Stories of N.V.M. González and Manuel Arguilla," *Sands and Coral*, '66, Vol. 16; Publication, 49-51, 1966.