

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Allan Popa,
Kami sa Lahat ng Masama

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Philippine Studies vol. 52, no. 1 (2004): 141–143

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

acquaintances formed during those years. It seems, then, a particularly fitting finale to a very rich academic career.

Manlapaz, however, still remains unstoppable.

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Allan Popa, **Kami sa Lahat ng Masama**. Quezon City: High Chair, 2003. 59 pages.

When his first collection of poems *Hunos* (2000) was published, Allan Popa was hailed by Virgilio S. Almario as part of a new generation of poets who write in Filipino but whose world is not Tagalog. Nonetheless, whatever is picked up from this “nilakhang daigdig” finds its way in the national language.

Popa demonstrates this in his second collection *Morpo* (2001), which shows the processes by which the Filipino language may form, melt, and erode subject matter and subjectivities with the dynamism of a language that is continuously re-forming and in-forming itself. Difficult to translate into English, the poems generally rely on wordplay (puns, homonyms), abstractions, and parentheticals. These devices may seem difficult to readers familiar with the traditional poetry written in Filipino, but the book prescribes its own discourse and consciousness so that each poem extends to the next until the end of the collection. Such is *Morpo*.

The reader familiar with this vision will be open to Popa's latest collection, his fourth, entitled *Kami sa Lahat ng Masama*. The title comes from the last line of the Tagalog version of the Lord's Prayer: “. . . iadya mo kami sa lahat ng masama.” Popa does away with the two words “iadya mo,” so that the result is, in English, “we in all evil.” This book is not about deliverance, but it is an exploration of the depths of man's evil.

The poems are arranged in the same manner as the books of the late Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès (*The Book of Questions*, *The Book of*

Shares, etc.) and of the American Louise Glück (*The Wild Iris*, *Meadowlands*, *Vita Nova*). They are built around a concept or structured like a novel. They have to be read in sequence from beginning to end. Popa once read all the fifty-two poems in this collection before an audience of students and teachers at a Manila university. It recalled the ritualized chanting of the *pasyon*, except that *Kami sa Lahat ng Masama* is a downward dark spiral.

The bookness of poetry: how many of our writers have attempted such? The usual practice is to gather together one's assortment of poems (usually forty pieces) with no conscious or preconceived unifying concept, the criterion for inclusion being that the piece has been previously published, that it has been presented at a prestigious workshop, or that it has won at a literary contest. Name recall and prestige help sell the book. Popa's book, however, is meant to be taken as a unity of vision and utterance, despite the gaps and silences between poems and the elliptical leaps from one evil moment to the next. Vision and its utterances are consistent.

Popa lends immediacy, and hence increases the sense of dread and evil in some poems by applying a Q-and-A technique. In one poem, Job is asked, "Bakit basa ang iyong tinig?" The answer: "May sakit nakahahawa / Maging ang aking salita" (p. 47). This is a technique found in *Morpo*, except that in *Masama* the shift from one speaker to another heightens the sense of despair, disturbance, and tension. In another instance, Pilato is asked why he cannot face the front ("Bakit ka tumatalikod?"); his reply: "Hindi ko na makikilala / Ang mukha ng hustisya" (p. 53).

Within the wholeness of the collection there is a smaller book, a cycle of eight poems, which begins on page 20 and ends on page 27. Though named after the liturgical hours (Matuninas, Laudes, Prime, Vesperas, etc.), the poems are not prayers; rather, they form a narrative of someone abducted, tortured, and dying. The juxtaposition of suffering with the hours of praise heightens the sense of helplessness, both of the persona and the reader. "Ngunit walang magawa" (p. 27) goes the poem "Completorium," which closes this cycle, a helplessness that spills over to the other poems.

In the poem "Ang Babae sa Bintana," we read about a fire. The people on the street look at a house on fire, unable to save the woman trapped within. They can only watch the horror of the "hubog na hinubaran / At binibihisan ng apoy" (p. 8). Then, two lines, which serve as a refrain, creep in: "Wala na silang magagawa. / Hindi sila makapaniwala" (p. 8). The reader, too, is as helpless, only bearing witness to the witnessing. Later comes the smell of flesh burning—"amoy ng iniihaw na laman" (p. 8), which makes the onlookers drool—"Hindi nila napipigil ang paglalaway. / Nilulunok nila ang laway" (p. 8). They hold their desires back, with guilt. It is this guilt that defines the limits of man's evil, specifically Catholic guilt, in several poems ("Siete Palabras," "Divino Rostro," "Naj Hammadi," and "Vestuario").

Popa's personae do not look up for hope; they bow their heads, digging their own graves, until they reach the lowest depths. It is from the depths that the book draws its dark power, as the opening poem "Mula sa Kalaliman" asserts: "Narito ang mga upos ng kandila. / Narito ang mumunting gamit na nawaglit. / Narito ang ulo ng bumagsak na kometa" (p. 1). And, unlike other cycles where some bit of hope or redemption is offered, the last poem "Umbra" completes the descent and leaves us with the image of grimy hands: "Madudumi ang kanilang kamay. Kumakahig, kumakahig" (p. 59).

Popa's images of "pagkakahig" echoes the digging in Paul Celan's poem written after the Shoah: "O du gräbst und ich grab, und ich grab mich dir zu . . ." Popa, however, until the very end refuses to implicate the participatory "I." The they-ness of the personae is indirectly the *Kami* in the book's title. From the mud in the riverbanks they try to shape people, drying them under the sun, as did the pagan gods, but the poem says: ". . . agad itong nadudurog pabalik sa lupa. / Hindi sila sumusuko" (p. 59). Like Celan's people, they dig because the earth is inside them; and the earth is evil.

The stark whiteness of the book's cover only heightens the darkness of its utterances and vision. And we read.

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