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**Growing Pains: Filipino Essays in English
A Historico-Critical Anthology in Two Volumes, 1910-1954 and
Volume One : 1910-1937
by Leopoldo Y. Yabes, Ph.B., M.A.**

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GROWING PAINS

FILIPINO ESSAYS IN ENGLISH. A Historico-Critical Anthology in Two Volumes, 1910-1954. Volume One: 1910-1937. Edited by Leopoldo Y. Yabes, Ph.B., M.A., University of the Philippines. Quezon City. 1954. Pp. xii-313.

"For his early pieces, he seems to have had a degree of fondness not very laudable: what he has once written he resolves to preserve, and gives to the publick an unfinished poem...." Thus did Samuel Johnson write of Milton. It was an unkind remark, and in Milton's case uncalled for; but it is the sort of remark that keeps coming to mind as one turns page after page of Professor Yabes' anthology. The majority of the essays in this collection are *unfinished*. One wonders how some of them could have merited publication in the first place, let alone republication after the lapse of years.

There are indeed pieces here that might with credit have been written by students for a school magazine, or even by freshmen or sophomores for an undergraduate publication. There is an imaginary newspaper correspondent's report of the capture of Aguinaldo, even as our high school students of Latin are forever writing "newspaper accounts" of Caesar's Gallic War. There is a sentimental piece on Mother's Day; some ponderous if not very profound statements on education; a letter from abroad such as a student would write; an imitation of Addison; an echo from *L'Allegro*; two hundred and twenty-five bits of effervescent nonsense on poetry:

Poetry is the fever and music without the meaning of the word.
...Poetry is the route of a star to infinity...Poetry is the
laughter of Christos that no one has ever heard...Poetry is
the promise that Christos made to his Secret Woman: *never,*
*never, to reveal her name....*¹

Pieces such as these might well be found in a school publication; but isn't it rather surprising to find them included in a "Historico-Critical Anthology in Two Volumes"?

One is reminded of a line from Horace: *nonumque prematur in annum*; put it aside for nine years before publishing it. A revered teacher used to have a novel translation for this line. Whenever anyone brought him some worthless verses, he would not say (being too polite to say it): "These verses are no good."

Instead he would scribble at the bottom of the page: "Put these verses in your trunk for nine years, then reread them — and weep." Some of the authors might conceivably be inclined to weep when they see their juvenile essays republished in this anthology. Some of these authors have since attained eminence; presumably they prefer to be remembered by posterity for maturer work than that included here.

To be fair, however, one should hasten to add that the editor has not made any claim to having produced an anthology of literary gems. Professor Yabes' preoccupation has been with the history of Filipino essay-writing in the English language, and these pieces have presumably been chosen to illustrate its progress. As a source-book, therefore, this volume might prove of some value. It is to be regretted, however, that despite the sub-title, there are no historico-critical notes, beyond some brief footnotes (about three or four in the entire volume) of a perfunctory character.

It is further to be regretted that Professor Yabes has not incorporated in this volume his own essay on the development of essay-writing in the Philippines. That essay has been published in a journal of limited circulation; the present volume might have made it more readily accessible to the general public.

But, accepting the book as it is, and assuming that the selection is representative (an assumption which the editor's competence in the field allows us to make), we find ourselves face to face with a picture of Philippine letters not pleasant to contemplate. For instance, our writers have not always been masters of idiom ("The Filipino woman is the paragon of modesty par excellence"²). Nor have they always been masters of sentiment. Witness the following passage:

"Is your mother living or dead?" I was asked.

"She is dead," I answered almost inaudibly.

"Then you should wear the white flowers," said the girl with the pearly, tenuous *cadenas*.

Immediately, with kindly hands and simple grace, she pinned those dear, lovely white blossoms to my coat. Every reader of these words, who has known the deep anguish, unutterable sorrow of losing Mother, will understand the emotions that overwhelmed me during those moments. As I stood there, at the portal of the house of God, while I was being adorned with the flowers that were meant to remind me of my mother,

it seemed as if her loving face smiled at me through the sombre veil of those many years of loss and longing. . . .

and more of the same for two pages.³ But these are not the most common offences. The most common offense is triviality. Our writers seem to have a genius for the banal, a propensity to say the most trite things in the most trite manner. This banality shows itself in several ways. For instance, in sententious mouthings on education,⁴ or on national culture;⁵ or it might show itself in bombastic language or trite clichés. Thus, the nations are engaged "in wholesale slaughter in fields already stained with reeking blood" while the "best blood of humanity" is being "drained on the altar of desolation" to "propitiate the anger of that Moloch of death."⁶ Our freedom is "trammeled" by religion and politics which unite "to destroy man's dearest heritage." Our "gloomy religious atmosphere breeds an element which never fails to undermine" man's "creative impulse." Men are led "as a herd of sheep" by a leader who is a "selfish and short-sighted demagogue"; and man's "evolution, whether mentally, socially, politically, or materially considered, does not fall on his lap as a boom from heaven."⁷ (I have twice looked at that sentence: the word is, indeed, *boom*!) As for the State, it "will never be able to accomplish" certain objectives "as long it does not inculcate in every man of this country" the "resolution to improve himself." Man should keep before him "a picture of the ideal citizen that he should be," and he should "go out and meet his destiny himself like a modern man, to search for his happiness, rather than like a Stoic resolved to suffer under the circumstances of his existence."⁸ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch might have enriched his celebrated essay on jargon with many additional examples from this volume!

A large portion of the book is devoted to essays in literary criticism—mostly of an inferior variety. Indeed, one or two of these are not essays at all but interminable collections of *disjecta membra* (Garcia Villa's "Definitions of Poetry" stretch on for twenty pages!).

It is not all dark, however. There are some good essays in this anthology. The excellent ones are very few, but enough perhaps to redeem the volume. There is a rather revealing dialogue about six olympians by Jose Lansang,⁹ a good piece on Belloc by Estrada,¹⁰ a thoughtful essay by Viterbo bewailing the abandoning of Spanish by the University of Santo Tomas,¹¹ a

brief bit of poetic prose called "Wings."¹² There is a fine piece of nostalgic prose on old photographs by Rotor.¹³ There is a meditative treatment of death by Icasiano, which begins with an exquisite paragraph:

She folded her hands upon her bosom, this four-year child of mine, and, as her breathing became more labored, prayed as I led her: "Jesus, You love little children; help me!" That was at midnight of November 28, 1932. A few minutes later, she had joined the angels, and left us in an anguish that numbed all feeling.¹⁴

That is prose. It is good English prose, yet also genuinely Filipino. As I led her: an Englishman would not put it that way, nor would an American or an Irishman or an Australian. It is not incorrect, it is merely distinctive. It is distinctively, and charmingly Filipino.

When there are such gems as these (and a few others), why must so many pages be filled with inferior material? When we could write such excellent English, why must we demonstrate how poorly we can write? There is a good essay here by Mangahas on "Being Ashamed of One's Past." He says, the very thought of his early attempts at authorship used to make him blush. "When one can realize how poorly he has done in the past, there is a matter for self-congratulation."¹⁵ Perhaps there is a point for all of us there.

We are indebted to Prof. Yabes for having plowed through this mass of material, which could not have been a pleasant task for him. For, if the truth must be told, this is a tedious anthology. Let us hope that Volume Two will be much better.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

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1 "Definitions of Poetry" by J. Garcia Villa (1935 etc.), pp. 224-243.

2 "In Praise of Women" by Cecilio Lopez (1936), p. 243.

3 "The White *Cadena-de-amor*" by Jorge Bocobo (1928), p. 29.

4 "College 'Uneducation'" by Jorge Bocobo (1921), pp. 23-26; "Youth and Education" by Benito F. Reyes (1936), pp. 281-283; etc.

5 "The Rizal We Do Not Know" by Carlos P. Romulo (1928), pp. 53-56; etc.

6 "The Dawn of a Nobler Age" by Pedro de la Llanza (1917), pp. 15-16.

7 "Letter from a Filipino Abroad" by Juan Collas (1920), pp. 20 f.

8 "Problem for Narcissus" by Mauro Mendez (1936), pp. 251-253.

9 "Six Olympians Talk" by Jose A. Lansang (1933), pp. 162-166.

10 "Young Hilaire" by Antonio Estrada (1935), pp. 216-218.

11 "The Swing of the Pendulum" by Antonio Viterbo (1928), pp. 44-50.

12 "Wings" by Loreto Paras (1929), p. 72.

13 "Bouquet of Memories" by Arturo B. Rotor (1930), pp. 73-78.

14 "Sonia" by Francisco B. Icasiano (1933), pp. 170-175.

15 "On Being Ashamed of One's Past" by Federico Mangahas (1933), pp. 153-155.