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Flowing On, by Dimalanta

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FLOWING ON. By Ophelia A. Dimalanta. Manila: Santo Tomas University Press, 1988. 116 pages.

Ophelia Dimalanta's poems are the travel notes of a poetic pilgrim, whose tourist stops are the landmarks of a journey that is both inward and outward. Poet Alfred Yuson, in the "Proheme" to *Flowing On*, calls part I "transit Poetry" (Dimalanta entitles it simply "Flowing On"). He describes part II, which Dimalanta calls "Some Rite of Passage," as an "inward voyage." The description captures the basic analogue of the volume which is essentially a parallelism of the inward and outward journey of the human person. External events, when reflected on poetically, yield their inner meaning for both the poet and the reader.

Almost all the poems in the collection reveal this same allegory of the external journey as an internal journey to self discovery and self realization. The poet is a "surveyor of fleeting panoramas" (p. 4). She is also the chronicler of an "inward portage that questions both the joyous and the sorrowful mysteries of a country" (p. 5). The poems are "a personal engagement in these and other flailings" (p. 5).

"Along the Oregon Coastline" describes the scene and then asks "how does one gather this / pageantry whole in the mind's / harboring arms." The poem ends: "still we must remain flowing in / and out of miles and lives. . . ." (pp. 16-17). "Crossing the Line Into California and Into Fall" begins with "Stopping by the woodside / to make friends with the trees . . ." and ends with "Oh, how much nearer home we are" (p. 22). "On A Slow Boat to Bohol," which Yuson describes as a "pluperfect portrait of Philippine seafaring" (p. 5), ends with this final stanza:

For one never reasons with the sea.
And quite sadly, also with the aches
In regions of the body
Impermeable to sorceries. (p. 40)

Dimalanta has managed, with consummate skill, to turn poems about Vancouver and Hangzhou, as well as political and social poems on Smokey Mountain and Ninoy Aquino and occasional poems like the death of Anouilh and a Sister Amelia, into profoundly moving allegories of all the aches and pains in human hearts.

One of the best examples of the inward-outward allegory and the occasion-reflection structure of so many of her poems is "On the Wing: September, '87." It is a description of a plane flight: "here I go again, strapped / into a flight" while "the plane makes a creaking / sound like pages in time being / turned . . ." and "I totter through time zones / changing with sun . . . captive in one's / own time's black holes." Completing the cycle of inward reflection, the poem ends with existential reality of man trapped

... in this gridlocked
quiddity of forever winging
and forever fleeing and forever
flapping about voicelessly within. (p. 15)

Josephine A. Pasricha, on the cover blurb of *Flowing On*, describes Ophelia Dimalanta as "the ultimate anagogic poet." I disagree with both the superlative (that belongs to Dante or Milton), and with the use of the term anagogic. Anagogic poetry and interpretation seek to extract from language a spiritual or mystical significance. In the medieval interpretation of texts that was heavenly interpretation, concerned with the final spiritual end or destination of man, as opposed to the moral and allegorical senses, which also went beyond the literal. There are no spiritual or mystical poems in *Flowing On*. (I can find only one mention of Heaven and that ironically is "Temple of Heaven" in the poem entitled "Tianamen Square"). *Flowing On* is not anagogic poetry, even though there are "inscapes, epiphanies, oracles, apocalyptic illuminations . . . the beautiful and the Sublime." These are the characteristics of any metaphoric poetry. (Is there any other kind?) It is true that we also find microcosm in *Flowing On*, as well as "cyclical processes of the high and the low, the male and female principles, Apollo and Dionysus." But these are evidences of allegorical poetry rather than of anagogic. Yuson, in the "Proheme," has more accurately analyzed the poems as allegorical. Dimalanta's talent is not that she writes anagogic poetry, but that she uses the basic material of poetry—metaphor and allegory—with such exceptional skill, in a gentle, most unobtrusive way.

One must take note of Dimalanta's language, for herein lies her genius. Lines like "Beginning or ending loves, / Where's the difference?" (p. 38), "One does not reason with the sea" (p. 39), "we have been all the hapless / lovers in this wayward world" (p. 66), and "the sea hugs the shoreline / and the sun rims the sea" (p. 16) are genuine poetry. Nick Joaquin says that her verse has "a music so elfin it becomes audible only on intent reading." (Introduction to *THE TIME FACTOR*). Cirilo Bautista says "here is the unobtrusive movement of sounds . . . whose beauty strikes one only in the ensuing silence after they have gone. That is when the poetry begins, really." (Foreword to *The Time Factor*.)

Ophelia Dimalanta is rightly recognized as one of the major poets in English in the Philippines. Three volumes of poetry (Montage, 1974, *The Time Factor*, 1984, and now *Flowing On*, 1988) have established that reputation. She is one of the founders of the Manila Critics Circle and has won awards in the Palanca Literary Contest for *Montage* and *The Time Factor* and from *Poet and Critic* (Iowa State University) for *Montage*. Proof of her literary versatility is the fact that she has also won awards for her fiction (*Focus* Literary Award) and for her criticism (CCP and Philippine Writers Union Award). She has been honored a number of times by her Alma Mater (the University of Santo Tomas) in the field of literature (1976, 1980, 1988). Her poetry has appeared in the United States and in Germany, Russia and Japan. She is presently at work on *Phil-*

ippine Poetic II, a sequel to her first volume of Philippine literary criticism, *The Philippine Poetic*, which appeared in 1976.

Let me add a footnote on Part Three of this volume which I am in no position to judge. It is entitled "In Another Tongue" and is a series of translations from Dimalanta's earlier volume in English (*The Time Factor*) by Virgilio Almario, Cirilo Bautista, Jun Cruz Reyes, Vim Nadera, Teresita Fortunato and Herminio Beltran. There is one translation by Dimalanta herself, and one by her son, Wystan. Dimalanta writes in the "Notes on the Translators":

I conceived the idea of having some of my poems . . . translated into Filipino out of a sense of curiosity. How would my poetry fare in another tongue? Needless to say, I have always been quite aware of the problems of translation, more so of poetry which usually bristles with wordplays [sic], considering the essential uniqueness of the English language and of Filipino, the imaginative truths which are most of the time rooted on [sic] the untranslatable, poetry's essential rhythm. Destroy this and you virtually destroy the author's presence. (p. 114)

One gets the impression that although Dimalanta's curiosity has been satisfied, she was not entirely satisfied with the result. Later in the same note, she writes:

All are happy translations. . . . Modern translation which I think is what has been approximated here is concerned primarily with the phenomenology of a given work, often trying to work in a territory between two tongues, rather than offering to faithfully reconstruct one on the foundation of the other. (p. 116)

I suspect that when she says that, Dimalanta, superb poet that she is, heaves a wistful sigh. For when one works in the territory between languages what happens to the original poem which was so close to its author's heart and child of her creative instinct? The phenomenology of a poem can be no substitute for the poem, no more than the name of the rose can be the rose.

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