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Filipino Poet, Erect and Audible

LEONARD CASPER

FOR too long in the Philippines, the urge for national self-expression having put out the eyes of discrimination, anyone, who could manage a rhyme or metaphor has been counted a poet. A physician-surgeon from Antique embalms, in a mimeographed volume called *Verisimilitude*, verse with such titles as "Portia on Streptomycin," "June and Diarrhea," or "Inguinal Hernia." A would-be Jose Garcia Villa from Capiz papers the walls of *his* book with semi-colons—an advance on the comma, crying "Un-Manila Me" and singing the "his-ness" of his id. A rhetorician from Foreign Affairs is applauded for his "poetic ascents" when, in open assembly but with half-closed eyes, he proclaims:

...the cultural conference like this one, called to listen to each other's national heartbeats and heartthrobs, this conference convened to penetrate on the wings of music into each other's understanding, this cultural congress gathered to sing into beautiful reality the cultural compenetration of Southeast Asian peoples...

Too long has puffery, the discharge of emotion in untempered language, passed for poetry. Often Filipino spokesmen have praised the supersensitivity of their people, made visible they have said in the Filipino's "instinctively graceful" dancing and "innately poetic soul" brimming with sentiments. Unfortunately, sometimes the alleged sensitivity turns out to be petulance and impulse, rash judgment and unreasoned response exhibiting little *range* of feeling or *depth* of consideration: signs of immaturity. The Philippines can afford to be

objective in its literary appraisals now, and call hack minds, even in government bureaus, what they are, because honest poets now are erect and audible among them.

The struggle to stand up and be counted properly has been confounded, in the past, by the stature of lawyers and business executives who thought their ponderous rhetoric was Whitmanian. They forgot the American's craft at consolidating images, through symbol clusters; they saw only the uncompressed catalog. They forgot his knowledge of the recitative, and themselves sounded like jeepney drivers hawking their destinations. They forgot his imagination which foreshadowed eternity, and looked homeward instead to last century's chauvinism. Amador Daguio's *Bataan Harvest*, today, sounds like fizzling plaza fireworks set off by the Psychological Warfare division; Zulueta da Costa's *Like the Molave* sometimes stirs the animal hackles, but never the cockles of the fully human heart. Place them end to end: and one can tell Da Costa, and one can tell Whitman:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion.
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the
the father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

O souls
And spirits of the martyred brave, arise!
Arise and scour the land! Shed once again
Your willing blood! Infuse the vibrant red
Into our thin anaemic veins; until
We pick up your Promethean tools and, strong,
Out of the depthless matrix of your dream
And from the silent cliffs of freedom, we
Carve out forever your marmoreal dream!
Until our people are become like the molave,
Rising on the hillside, unafraid,
Strong of its own fibre; yes, like the molave!

The *new* poets like to be read aloud too, but not without meditation, not as declamatory noisemakers.

Misunderstood-Villa (or e.e. cummings) has been a source of unpoetics second only to misunderstood-Whitman. Strangely, the worst offender has been Villa himself, unable to distinguish between his own sin and his own grace; between doubt hidden in radiant assertion—

My most. My most. O my lost!
O my bright, my ineradicable ghost.
At whose bright coast God seeks
Shelter and is lost is lost. O
Coast of Brightness. O cause of
Grief. O rose of purest grief.
O thou in my breast so stark and
Holy-bright. O thou melancholy
Light. Me. Me. My perfidy.
O my most my most. O the bright
The beautiful the terrible Accost.

and soul-cracking conceit disguised as humble conflict with divinity—

Now I will tell you the Future
of God. The future of God is
Man. God aspired before and
Failed. Jesus was too much
God. Since God is moving
Towards Man, and Man is moving
Towards God—they must meet
sometime. O but God is always
A Failure! That Time is the
End of the world. When God
And Man do meet—they will
Be so bitter they will not speak.

So creator resents the possibility of Creator, even while he envies the celestial almighty creativeness.¹

Despite the luminous cosmological adventuring of a few of Villa's poems, the effect on Philippine poetry of his whole work so far has been predominantly that of disfiguration. Gradually, those who, after his manner, have allied themselves to chronic semi-colons and periods have discovered that his commas regiment rather than liberate. They are not meant as punctuation, of course. Yet even as emblems of procession-music "measure," their effect is an artificial and indiscriminate

solemnity, where every word is equally, and therefore wrongly, weighed and scrutinized.² His latest poetry (supposedly part of a series, although only one appeared months ago in the *Sunday Times*, followed by the silence of irresponsibility) is a bad imitation of his earliest.

Nevertheless, taken at their best, Villa's poems still form the most imposing corpus in this country, simply because they have found a central and reproductive theme: the daily wrestling of God and man for man's soul, and even God's soul; child rejecting parent and wanting to be his own ancestor, progenitor of his own father.

Two poets who soon might equal this achievement, if they can find a friend such as Villa found in Laughlin of *New Directions*, are Bienvenido Santos and Carlos Angeles. The latter's associative imagery is the more startling, yet both have the faculty of giving to the uncommonplace an illusion of simplicity, through the restraint of line and stanza. The peopled situations that they treat seem so everyday as to be anonymous and therefore easily recognizable. But their knowledge about Anyman, revealed with such casual ritual as if never concealed, therefore has only all the more power, for being irreducibly true—making gasps of awe dawn in the blood.

The unfailing quiet shock of these poets suggests major motifs stirring, which nevertheless seem intent on remaining partially incoherent until their scattered works are collected as promised. *Katha I* looks forward to an early collection by Angeles; Santos has had his own volume committed, for over a year, to the Archipelago press which, unfortunately, chose to publish first Agcaoili's indiscriminate anthology and Edilberto Tiempo's anti-novel.³

As well-disciplined and even more sharply narrated are the poems of Edith Tiempo and Ricaredo Demetillo. Hers are best when bleak with loss—the childhood of innocence; hers are lines of Jacobean vengeance, reminiscent of the *Duchess of Malfi's* dark fire. Demetillo's are more sophisticated, tending to pumiced satire. Both take power from the concentrated scene, the character suddenly ripped from his skin. But for

all their educated violence and refined revolt, both have avoided being grounded so far in a vision beyond the sudden scene, the one-act tableau; in a dramatic wisdom, by which human involvements exceeding the mere moment of inception are transported to fulfillment: the full human history in several acts, a rarity anywhere.

Compared with the precisions of these others, the new poems of Amador Daguio (since 1950) must be considered calculated risks, lonely expeditions into outer experience whose homeward messages are cryptic, deceptively incomplete, because seemingly without context, as if a later reassuring word were still expected from that distant forerunner. That is, such poems are less narrative, more lyrical, with a recurring quality of personal emotion which yet escapes *immediate* communication (even while it sidesteps excessive sentimentality) for being masked. Because this poet's response is so personal and so profoundly felt, it must be signaled only indirectly. The images are all venturesome, peripheral, brought captive from the senses' farthest reach; yet systematic and multi-reverberant, evocative. The reader must sense the nature of the contained, by his experience of the container. The demands of such poetry on the writer, lest it sliver into impressionistic fragments as happened so often with the divisible words of Homero Ch. Veloso and Hernando Ocampo, are just as great as on the reader. When he succeeds, Daguio kindles a fragile warmth, like the honeyed shadow of a candle's breath, which seems more humanly usable than felt knowledge arrived at more logically but coldbloodedly.

Daguio's misfortune is that he has given himself too much to political ghostwriting at a time of intensest maturity. Neither he nor the Philippines can afford such cultural suicide.

Of the newer poets, Alex Hufana is unquestionably the most likely to keep his promise. Recently (even in parts of his *kalisud* sequence) his imagery has trained itself to coalesce (eventually—in the retentive imagination—though not immediately), instead of each word, each phrase having its separate sideshow. All this has been achieved, despite the fact

that Hufana's poetic energy derives from the *conflict* of ideas and temporary *contrast* of symbols. Because the coalescence is earned, not gratuitous; gradual, not prompt: the development is dramatic. If he can restrain the delight he takes in excessive alliteration and internal rhyme, and put poetic consequence before his own pleasure at play, then paradoxically he might well achieve what after all is never a *donee* but a destination, the illusion of personal admission into the object as in the poetry of Daguió. (The self denied in the act of objectifying experience is always restored when the experience attains universality.) Hufana already has disciplined, without crippling, his sensibility by working extensively in the medium of one-act plays*

It is noteworthy that (aside from Daguió, a poet who has already traversed the regions of the short story and theater) the major Filipino poets writing today have tempered their craft by avoiding both the lyrically detached, and the discursive; the romantic abstract, and the essay-in-rhyme. Instead, they devise narrative poems, scenically or dramatically deployed, and in imagery resplendent. Narration is often more rewarding since it attempts to recreate in full the immediate human act. The readers' confidence in the writings of these few poets has grown as their dramatic ability has matured, along with their fluency in the idiom. Certainly the development of major themes would be encouraged by an equally mature reading and widespread discussion of the poet's collected thoughts.

A few private sources—some still insistent on anonymity—feel that Filipino poet and reader are now trained enough to be left in the same room without cannibalism resulting. Seven patrons and a publisher whose only profit was prestige helped *Six Filipino Poets* into print. The Asia Foundation, without publicity or propaganda, has promoted *Katha I* first in a series of annual anthologies of fiction and poetry. The editorship of *Signatures*, a rising magazine of verse, has been placed in the custody of Alex Hufana and Rony Diaz, by Dr. Clemente Cancio. In addition, the poets themselves have

* For samples of the work of the poets mentioned above, see the poems appended to this article.

ceased to be shy long enough to organize public readings of their own work....

The time may be very near when the educated Filipino will be sensitive to the difference between a politician and a poet. The poets hope so.

THE EYE

Carlos Angeles

The eye, sprout in the mesa of the mind,
Must seek sanctuary in the soul of sun.
Not the steely brilliance, no, not the blind-
ing fierceness of the sharp and silvered spun

That hurtles in a rain-ray down the sky
With felt and instant fury like a stun
Of jewels in the panic of an eye.
No. Not the splendor of the sudden sun,

But the core of the sun's intensity,
The burning center in the hearth of sky,
(Unseen by the eye of the blinded tree,
Sprout of a tree of the mind's choked cry),

The dazzling furnace of the sun's bright soul
Where tempered whole is kindness in the tray
Of fire. O, if it must survive at all,
Tendrils of faith be pushed against the day.

(from *Six Filipino Poets*,
ed. Leonard Casper, Manila, 1954)

THE FISHERMAN

Edith L. Tiempo

All day his floating face tangled with the net.
Each haul the meshes thrashed with angry tails,
The clustered eyes clamored and the slime and scales
And gills quivered with his own disgust. Yet,
Once, a boy fished where the fishes were more tame,
A stream where he dipped a small hand and the fishes came,
And when he gently chucked their bellies with a finger,
They slowly wagged their fins, roiling the water
Hardly. Man now, he seized a fish and peeled

Its scales alive and flung it in again;
 The naked creature hit the reefs and reeled,
 The water swirled—he jeered to see the little stain.
 He stalked again, he flung the net into a school,
 Drew in the catch, cursed each thrash and pull;
 His hunger scooped the sea, he preyed and trapped
 And tore the masks, and voiceless faces wept;
 He grudged the clutching mollusk its involuted stores,
 Pried, that the pearly oyster part its scrupulous doors.

(from *Six Filipino Poets*)

INFORMATION

Amador Daguiso

You must believe
 There were no roses
 For the altar.
 The green leaves
 Were for blue waters.

Bones preyed upon
 The garden's golden trees
 Before the coming
 Of the swallows.
 The hills were weights
 Of rocks upon my night.

I wept who had no tears
 To weep.
 You did not know.
 You did not need to know.

No altar waited
 When the roses bloomed
 For the green leaves; no
 Blue waters
 Washed my tired knees.

(from *Six Filipino Poets*)

PORO POINT

Alex Hufana

The rock still roots the water
 Tauter than the buoy in the channel
 That marks where men-of-war should enter
 And avoid the shallows of the turtle.

The lighthouse eye puts out. Today's communion
 Is in the pulpit of the machine
 Now when all owes it religion
 What adventure had the aborigine?
 One make-up moment to be emperor
 In this haunted hamlet on the coast —
 Fishers foam-furrow the equator
 To homage at a trading post.
 Now when divinity is frail
 Between the radar poles and the wishing well
 To beat the mind to a bell
 In brethren's bones with the sunken sail.
 As if from rising bottom, sound of sand
 Spills out cargo and conqueror
 On seven sights of land
 Far from either rock or buoy
 Like a prayer's amen, and ahoy!
 The brief bed of the whirling whore,
 The sunbath, the pinpointed star,
 And the native full five-strings deep in his guitar
 Sermons how to suffer.
 Now back to feed the lamps their fuel
 While the rock still roots the water
 Tauter than the buoy in the channel.

(from *Katha I*, ed. J.C. Tuvera, Manila, 1955)

THE LATE SINNERS

Bienvenido N. Santos

We are the late sinners forced to forage
 What remains in the troughs left desolate
 By quicker ancestors. We had a glimpse
 Of them, polishing wings to look just like
 The very angels', planning flights into
 Realms where glitter is touchstone to virtue.

Who will call off their flights? Surely not these
 Late comers to the lonely feast, whose only
 Allies were the foxes, but now where are
 The vineyards and the heady wine? Kneel down,
 Bleed bright your sins at the confessional.
 Oh, Master, my birth was my first trespass,
 My sin, knowing, but not knowing enough;
 Forgive me, too, this blindness in the glare

Of so much light from crevices in walls
And words of martyrs born beyond their time.

Afterwards, allow us to die alone;
Having come too late, we shall not miss much
Or know the fire dividing splendor from ruin.

(from *The Diliman Review*)

* * *

¹ Certainly it is no coincidence that the man who described Christ as "The true dark hero. He with the three-eyed thunders" has drawn himself three-eyed in a familiar self-portrait.

² Villa's comparison of his comma technique with Seurat's pointillism is superficial. Seurat's points of color, varying in dimension, are hardly as mechanical or unfelt as Villa's device.

³ As this is written, the collected poems of both Bienvenido Santos (*The Wounded Stag*) and of Ricaredo Demetillo (*No Certain Weather*) are publications expected the year's first quarter.