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Procopio Solidum: A Negrense Poet

Regina Garcia-Groyon



Procopio Solidum holds the distinction of being the first Filipino to publish a collection of poems in English—*Never Mind and Other Poems*. Published in 1921, this book exemplifies the kind of poetry written by those Filipinos who first ventured to express their vision of life in the new language. Procopio Solidum must be valued for recording a Filipino's sensibility in the first 40 years of this century.

A Biographical Note

Procopio Solidum was born in Cadiz, Negros Occidental, on 6 July 1901, the son of Jayme Solidum and Columba Lopez-Vito. He studied in the barrio school of Sicaba, and later at the Cadiz Central School where he wrote his first poem, "Your Early Time." Upon graduation from high school in 1919, Solidum left for Manila and was admitted as a working student at the Far Eastern College (now University). The biographical entry in *Who's Who in the Philippines* does not mention a degree received from this school, or if he completed a college course there. It appears he returned to Cadiz and continued his studies at the Northern Negros College where he was also Chief Clerk. It was in this school that his proficiency in English was first noted after he received a very high score in the test given by the Department of Public Instruction in 1921. The same year, his first book was published, and so great was the joy of the officials of Northern Negros College that they gave a party in his honor.

A story is told about Solidum's facility with words. On 30 November 1921, some students requested him to compose a poem on Andres Bonifacio for the celebration of National Heroes Day. The story may well be apocryphal because it makes much of the fact that there was no available paper to write on. The young Procopio was supposed to have rummaged through a wastebasket until he found

a piece of paper. Only that fact seems incredible. The point of the story is that he closeted himself in a room and within a very short period of time emerged with a poem on Bonifacio, which he himself read before the studentry. No copy of this poem is available. The prime reason for its merit, however is the audience's amazement at the ease of its composition (Busilak n.d.).

Solidum seemed bent on a literary career when he published, in 1923, his second collection of poems, *Reveries*. He also worked as a literary editor of the *Resume Literary Forum* in 1923, the popular *Weekly Literary Forum* from 1923 to 1924, and *Health Educator* in 1924.

Solidum was a pioneer in education as well as in Philippine Literature in English. After his marriage to a schoolteacher, Constancia Ballares, on 15 November 1925, he began the work not only of a schoolteacher but also of a founder of schools. With his wife, he settled in Ibaday, Aklan where he put up the Ibaday Academy. He saw the need for more schools and, after returning to Negros, founded sixteen private schools in Cadiz, Sagay, Victorias, and Manapla with a combined enrollment of two thousand students. In 1932, he established a vocational school, the Quezon-Osmeña Institute in Bacolod. The year 1932 seems to mark the end of his career in education, because in 1933, he assumed the position of Special Investigator for the Department of Labor.

Even as he devoted himself to education, Solidum continued to publish poetry: *Soul of a Woman* in 1928, *Philippine Nursery Rhymes* in 1934 and *Woodrow Wilson and Other Poems* in 1937. What is worth noting is that towards the end of his life, Solidum felt the need to express himself in his native Hiligaynon and was able to publish in 1938, an epic of 550 stanzas—*Ang Pagka Pilipinhon (Being a Filipino)*. What is unfortunate is that no copy of this work is to be found in Negros. In 1939, Solidum published *China Today*, a markedly anti-Japanese volume written in protest of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The poems eulogize the Chinese people, their leader, Chiang Kai-Shek, and portray the Japanese as the "godless knights of the Nippon Fleet." The poems, of course, proved prophetic in their warning to prepare for the "Pirate Lord of Asia." The Last collection, *Stars and Stripes*, was never published because World War II intervened. Solidum died at the age of 39 on 14 November 1940, a little over a year before Pearl Harbor. He was spared the horror of the Japanese Occupation, decidedly a blessing for someone who so feared and detested Japan's imperial designs on Asia.

Collected Poems

In 1961, the poems of Procopio Solidum were published by his family in a slim volume, about 40 pages, entitled *Collected Poems*. In the introduction, Amador Daguo makes an objective assessment of the works without seeking to flatter the family because of his friendship with Dr. Ifor Solidum, one of the poet's sons. Daguo affirms the need for today's poet to appreciate "our poetical development" in English, agreeing, as he does, with T.S. Eliot that "no poet . . . has his complete meaning alone. His significance . . . is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead." Daguo sees the need for the Filipino poet and the student of the Philippine literature to look back at the "poetical beginning in English" and to empathize with the literary pioneers who needed to express their aspirations in the language they believed to be more poetical because they were educated to assume that the best thoughts had been couched in the English language. So, Solidum, like his contemporaries, wrote "close to patterns . . . at their command . . . in order to express strongly their own involvement" in life. (Daguo 1961, iii)

Three poems from *Never Mind* provide a view of the young Solidum's idealized woman. There are recognizable echoes of the Romantic poets, but these are combined with images uniquely Filipino. In "Fair Rosario of Sagay," we find the standard images of ivory-white teeth, grace in every motion, and tresses black as night. But instead of roses and coral for cheeks and lips, we find "eyelids like a feather's edge," jazmine blooms and breath mixed with "the odor of a Kananga rose kept dry." There are intimations of John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in this fair Rosario, a woodland nymph with a grace learned from dancing fairies. However, she is not the ominous enchantress who leaves the knight "alone and palely loitering." She is herself the "beautiful maid of forlorn," and the poet is her "armed Knight" forever committed to defend her. There seems to be no reason for the shift from the delightful smiles and looks of the fair Rosario in the first and second stanzas to the forlorn maid of the last stanza, but the poet has been moved to such a comparison by memories of romances read in the past which all seemed to depict ladies as fairy-like as the fair Rosario of Sagay.

Fair Rosario of Sagay

Eyelids like a feather's edge,
Tresses long, and black as night;
Lips and cheeks like jasmine blooms,
Smiles and looks—the soul's delight!
And those Ivory-white teeth peeping
While she laughs as lovers sigh—
Will you envy if I worship
Fair Rosario of Sagay?

Grace is in her every motion,
For a woodland nymph is she,
Dainty dancing fairies taught her
In their moonlight frolics free;
And her breath is mixed with the odor
Of a Kananga rose kept dry—
Will you tease me if I rave over
Fair Rosario of Sagay?

I met her walking in the garden
While the twilight sun sank low;
Came the whisperings of romances
Of the golden long ago;
She the beauteous maid forlorn,
And her armed knight was I,
Vowed forever to defend her,
Fair Rosario of Sagay!¹

The poem, "I Have A Love" has the overused metaphors of Venus' eyes and hair, and Mona Lisa smile, as well as the awkward phrase, "a fairy pose." But the last stanza jars the reader from the flow of predictable images when it asserts how a painter may find that in the perfect model's "lips and dimpled cheeks," "sweet adelfas paint their hue."

I Have A Love

I have a love, and she is fair,
Much fairer than the fairest rose,—
She has rare Venus' eyes and hair,
And O, she has a fairy pose.

She is yet young—eighteen or so,
 Embodiment of joy and grace,
 And when she smiles or looks at you,
 Ah! Mona Lisa's in her face.

And in her lips and dimpled cheeks,
 Where sweet adelfas paint their hue,
 There may a painter when he seeks
 For ideal find her true!

"My Maiden Bride" is the exultation of a young man who has found the girl of his dreams, with the qualities not only of an angel but of that voluptuous virgin of the Muslim paradise, the houri. However, the sentiment of the young bridegroom is almost child-like as he beholds his angel bride asleep "like a sweet baby at noon." The perfect bliss is touching in its adoration of pure innocence and its utter lack of sexual desire. It is almost comic to visualize the youth's gratitude at the end of the poem when he is move to kneel down and pray.

My Maiden Bride

Under the bowers
 Of Youth's best hours,
 I've dreamed of one—
 My darling fair
 Of beauty rare
 Under the golden sun.
 No houri has her grace,
 Heaven shines in her face.

And all the night,
 While gleamed the light
 Of that full, ardent moon,
 My angel bride
 Lay by my side
 Like a sweet baby at noon;
 So spirit-pure she lay,
 I knelt me down to pray.²

Several poems in Solidum's first book deal with the prospect of imminent death. "Lover's Isle" is a poetic persona's recollection of his youthful dreams and fancies.

Lovers' Isle

I am sitting alone—
Dreaming of days now gone,
Calling back those of our own
 Youth's precious hours
 Under shady bowers
On Lovers' Isle far, far away!

Sweet are the dreams of the past—
Fine fancies soon follow fast,
Memories of youth ever last;
 Young loves free
 I still see,
On Lovers' Isle far, far away!

"When I'll Be Dead, Love" is a simple poetic exercise, but such a morbid anticipation of death seems too unlikely of a young man not yet married. Certainly, Solidum's persona is almost naive in his appeal for continuing remembrance even as he allows for a time when his wife may meet another man he hopes will be faithful to her.

When I'll Be Dead, Love

When I'll be dead, Love,
 And from your eyes I'm gone!
All that I beg, Love,
 Forget me not too soon.

When I'll be dead, Love,
 And I'll be in my grave,
Oh, don't forget, Love,
 To mark my lonely grave.

When I'll be dead, Love,
 Please wear a rose for me,—
And when you smell it, Love,
 What should its odor be?

When I'll be dead, Love,
 And you may hear my name,
How will you mention it, Love,
 With blushes and shame?

When I'll be dead, Love,
 Will you recall the days,
 When we were one, Love,
 O, those youthful ways!

When I'll be dead, Love,
 And you may meet a friend,
 See that he'll be true, Love,
 Faithful to the end.

Another poem, "My Psalm," articulates a young man's view of toil, which is not physical, because of a suggestion that work is done late into the night. This is a young man with a preference for the pleasures of solitude and the freedom to roam at will in "fields and mountain lanes," as well as the paths of nostalgic remembrance. He craves contentment only in home and family, and voices a wish that his love be finally buried by his side.

My Psalm

Oh! my path of life is rough!
 It's full of toil late in the night;
 I soar with visions far away
 To realms of dreams and men's delight.

I love to roam where men don't tread
 In fields and mountain lanes alone;
 I always long once more to stroll
 In lonely haunts of days now gone.

I like to hear the songs of birds,
 The tunes of music I can't break,—
 And voices of sweet girls and fond,
 One whose name I dare not speak.

I never worry that I'm poor—
 I am content in my way.
 The years may come, the years may go,
 Let me be what I am today.

I crave for none of life's best things;
 Contentment is my only goal.
 A home, a wife, and children gay
 And all the dreams of my poor soul.

If my lot be to die yet young
 Untasting of earth's joys and pride,
 All my wish is, when my Love dies,
 That she be buried by my side.

In "L'Envoi," the young man envisions himself as a "Viking bark," heavy with the treasure of his God-given talents and intent on reaching the isles of his dreams. He pronounces himself committed to living because his destination is "life's long task," a port peopled with those who have achieved what they were meant to accomplish. The Bugler is probably God because He urges all young men to "sail on the isles of their dreams."

L'Envoi

I am sailing . . . floating in a sea of dusk,
 Drifting with the breeze like a Viking bark;
 I am laden with precious gems,
 With my youthful diadems.
 I'll carry these to the land of the lark,
 The Bugler blows: "Sail on! Sail on!"
 To the isles of your dreams, sail on! sail on!"

I am entering the port—life's long task;
 From all the ways of life they come
 To greet me with a warm welcome.
 I'll show them now the truth that lies
 In the Bugler's cry, "Sail on! Sail on! . . .
 To the isles of your dreams, sail on! sail on!"

Only six poems from *Soul of a Woman* appear in *Collected Poems*. Amador Daguió, who read the entire work, notes that Solidum had begun to emerge from romantic seclusion to confront "the problems of his milieu." Daguió describes *Soul of a Woman* as a "narrative of threatened marital life, its initial problems of jealousy, a man's loneliness from his mate, his indiscretion and the terrible result—the birth of his first child, crippled and blind. The narrative . . . ends with the wife's letter explaining her suicide" (Daguió 1961: v).

Daguió advised the poet's son, Ifor, not to include this book in *Collected Poems* because he thought its craftsmanship was weak. Even as he recognized the impact of its realistic plot, Daguió thought the whole to be uneven and unedited. The value of the book lies in

Solidum's impulse to express the anguish of the little people whom he called "true Humanity." The six poems give no hint of the actual narrative. These are evocations of childhood and youth in a rural setting with their detailed pictures of the simple joys of barrio life.

"The Barrio Girl" crystallizes a young man's obsession with the memories of his dead sweetheart. The young man is committed to a life of permanent solitude. He rejects invitations to social gatherings and spends his meager salary on magazines, books and the mysterious mourning beads used to adorn the picture frame of the girl he used to know. His days are spent in melancholy recollection of happier days. His dreams are filled with images of her return to earth. Her birthdays are observed with an offering of a wreath of roses to her picture. The poems ends with the resolution that the wealth he may acquire someday will be given away "to men whose lives are burdened with the past."

The Barrio Girl

I long to be where sampaguitas bloom and tamsis sing from morn till night,
Not that I weary of city ways, but I'm just longing for delight.
Those purple landscapes beautiful! Preferred to a picture show,
With an ideal love, my boyhood love,—the barrio girl I used to know.

Sometimes I hate my lonely self and curse youth's luxury;
Now that I'm grown to manhood, my name is ranked with misery.
I only thought of sweet romance, and I was free when young to go,
Where I would write my youthful lyrics—all for her I used to know.

When there was a feast in the neighborhood, I would stand there before
her eyes,

And all the younger folks would talk of us as two in Paradise.
And when that idol answered them with her smiling gentle no.
How she'd look at me—and smile again, that girl I used to know.

Her gracious parents liked me much and called me to their home,
Sometimes I'd take my Sunday lunch with them and at twilight we
would roam.

We'd sit on top of a grassy hill and watch the west with dusk aglow,
And it was there I first swore love to this girl I used to know.

When the golden sun was down, we would be sitting all alone,
Hearing the evening larks and crickets sing in continuous monotone.
Then as if in mystic gallery my fervent youthful blood would glow
I would feel the throbings of her heart in mine—this girl I used to know.

But then a blast blew down that blooming rose, like a cloud she passed away,
I whose fate it is to mourn for her, day and night for her I pray.
What is life to me whose brightest dreams were buried long time ago?
What are honor, joy and fame?—nothing without the girl I used to know.

One time I was so ill, I thought I would die that gloomy hour,
I sent for her, she did come,—but the thought brought a healing power.
As if touched by a magic wand, my pain was gone—the world was
bright and lo!
I dreamed that God sent down an angel,—she was the girl I used to know.

One Eastertide we went together to mass in the town's old Church,
We met our friends, we had a jolly time, a night of nights in March.
She kissed the holy saint with reverence, then I dropped a coin or two,
"Why don't you kiss?" she asked,—so I obeyed to please the girl I used
to know.

Sometimes my friends find me in serious mood and curiously ask me why,
I know they sympathize in all my ways and so I would not tell a lie.
I'd tell them about my buried past, the grief and sorrows I passed through,
But I would also tell them about the dearest girl I used to know.

Sometimes a friend would come around my place and tell me stories of
his love,
I'd only smile and add a word or two, then tell him of the one above,
"Why, friend," he'd say to me in great surprise, "there are yet chances
fair for you!"
But I would tell him I'll never forget that rarest girl I used to know.

When I received my meager salary I'd hang around and purchase things,
Sometimes I'd buy magazines and books and mourning beads in tiny strings;
I'd read the books and magazines at night, the beads I'd hang them in a row,
Or place about the precious picture frame of the girl I used to know.

When I am overworked and yearn for rest, I'd lie in bed and take my pen,
Or write this down: "Today I'm all in and sad . . ." or see my past again.
Then I would find my eyes all wet, yet would not know why this is so,
But this I'm sure, her spirit watches me, a faithful girl I used to know.

There are times when I could almost see a face so very like her own,
I would spring upon my feet then, only to find she is unknown!
Yet there are times, and oftentimes, when I could hear a voice so low,
And this I always take to be the voice of the girl I used to know.

When her birthday comes I always place a wreath of roses on my desk,
I put her priceless picture by my own, and the room looks picturesque;
But when some people come, I hide them all—the beads, the wreath
and photos too,
I do not want them talking of the modest girl I used to know.

One day a lady friend of mine asked me why I didn't go to social balls,
Why I didn't go to local shows, nor make the usual Sunday calls;
I simply answered I was occupied and had a lot of things to do,
Although the reason is—there is no joy without the girl I used to know.

One time, three years ago, I visited her lonesome parents old,
Their eyes were filled with tears, on my cheeks, the tears, too, rolled;
I brought them things to eat, some novelties, and garments costly, new,
I also brought an enlarged likeness of the girl I used to know.

The dear old couple wanted me to stay with them awhile,
How my heart broke to find no more her face in gracious smile.
They asked me if I did not think of getting someone to help me through—
I told them I'd given up everything for the girl I used to know.

Last night I dreamed that she was back on earth and we sat side by side;
Left alone, I stole a kiss from her, she only sobbed and cried!
I was awakened suddenly, I found her not here in earthly glow,
I think she's lonesome in the other world, the girl I used to know.

If she were alive this moonlight night we would be walking hand in hand,
She loved to breathe the rural evening breeze, she said 'tis perfume of
the land.

She would be looking at the twinkling stars, the silvery clouds softly flow,
And we would marvel at His works—I and the girl I used to know.

We would stroll around the groves or up and down the village street,
I would tie around her neck a string of sampaguitas sweet.
Then when the silver moon was darkened, and the southern breeze
would blow,—

We'd dream that earth was Paradise—I and the girl I used to know.

If I should live in fame, or someday have some fortune vast,
I'd give them all to men whose lives are burdened with the past.
I would build a simple monument and there my sentiment to show,
Engrave this line in golden form: "To her, the girl I used to know."

"School Days" is a candid declaration of love for school, a sentiment quite alien to today's schoolboy. Solidum's schoolhouse may have only a nipa roof, but it has a shiny floor. All the teachers are good and kind, and all his classmates are wonderful. Solidum's love for learning is expressed in the persona's casual reference to the textbooks he memorized. The persona speaks of poems learned and the early attempts to write his own verses. The 3 R's are taught in this school, but even more delightful are the hours spent in vocational class when schoolchildren actually made their own desks and the persona himself recalls one well-crafted box he gave to a friend.

School Days

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 That schoolhouse by the sea,
 'Twas there I learned to read and write,
 And little geography.
 I dearly loved its nipa roof,
 Its walls and shiny floor,
 Loved to linger on its stairs,
 Stand behind the door.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 That initiated seat of mine,
 I used to hide my candies there
 Before I joined the line.
 And it was there I'd read some rhymes
 And tried to write my own—
 I'll ne'er forget that seat of mine,
 Perhaps it is now gone.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 That day I passed—Oh, Boy!
 I was so happy and so thrilled,
 My heart was filled with joy.
 I told my parents of my triumph,
 They ordered suits for me!
 I wish I were a boy again
 From countless worries free.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 My teachers good and kind,
 I loved them dearly, yes, I did,—
 Their words I'd always mind.

Their orders and assignments all
 I always did with heed,
 And so their friendships, favors, mine,—
 They liked me much indeed.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 My boyhood classmates all.
 I'll ne'er forget their faces, ways,
 Their sizes big and small!
 I'll ne'er forget those who were close
 To me from day to day,
 O yes, I'll ne'er forget my chums
 Although they are away.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 The books I used to read,
 I loved my textbooks very much,
 Most of them in my head!
 I'll ne'er forget my notebooks for
 Spelling, arithmetic,—
 O how I used to glance them o'er
 When I was dull or sick.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 The desks I made in school,
 T-squares, triangles, half-lap joints,
 That polished little stool.
 I'll ne'er forget that box I made,
 I gave it to a friend,
 I'll ne'er forget my days in school,
 O yes, until the end.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 That schoolhouse by the sea,
 'Twas there I first began to sing
 Of girls I used to see.
 I'll ne'er forget its garden, lawn,
 Where all the pupils met,—
 That old schoolhouse by the sea—
 I'll never, never forget!

"Old Home Town" goes beyond the typical picture of plaza, church and the Chinese stores to glory in the river big enough for steamers. Crime is virtually unknown in this little town whose

policemen have no work to do except perhaps to prevent gambling. Certainly, there is only affection for these "funny-looking guys" who carry guns, but who wear neither shoes nor coats. The harvest of the sea can sometimes bring a month-long supply of fish to every home. The annual fiesta means a crowded church, a band and the liberal use of firecrackers. Markets days are equally exciting when there is unlimited freedom to buy and eat anything. The last two lines sum up the goodness of those days when life was kind to the poorest of them all.

Old Home Town

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
The town where I was born;
The Chinese stores along the street,
The convent old, forlorn.

I'll ne'er forget the old plaza
Where I would romp and run;
And the ragged lamplighter, oh!—
I'll ne'er forget that man.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
The river and its banks;
The sailboats and *barrotos* small,
The *lorchas* and their planks;
I'll ne'er forget those happy days
When steamers came to town;
The boys would rush and take a bath.
Go running up and down.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
The policemen so tall;
They carried guns, but wore no shoes,
Some wore no coats at all.
How they would scare the gamblers all,
Sometimes they gambled too;
They looked so funny-looking guys,
They had no work to do.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
The fishermen who brought
The town some fish in the afternoon,
Sometimes little was caught!
And O when fishing season came
Bancas were filled with fish,—
The town could go wild for a month,
For full was every dish.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 The fiesta and the band
 So many people came to town,
 In church how we would stand;
 There were no autos in those days,
 No frightening horn and speed,
 We'd throw firecrackers here and there,
 No fire-prevention creed.

I'll ne'er forget, I'll ne'er forget,
 The market days in town;
 The market place was crowded, full,
 And people walked around.
 There were no tolls and sanitation rules,
 One could buy anything,—
 Ah! those days are past and gone—
 When beggars used to sing!

The excerpts from *China Today* (1939) enumerate the contributions of China to the world. Japan is the villain incarnate, "the envious Dwarf" intent on conquering "the sleeping Giant." Solidum calls the Japanese "the godless knights of Asia," a misnomer for a people who declared war in the name of their god-emperor. He appeals to his countrymen to prepare for the coming war. His rallying cry—"Boycott Japan. Help China."—is rather vague but his vision of the war is vivid enough to be prophetic:

Thus came "THE OCCUPATION" . . . farms, cities, and towns wiped out overnight,
 Helpless civilians slain and drowned to Nippon's armies great delight.
 Coolies and beggars, nuns and orphans, their corpses piled along the way,
 Mothers with babies in their arms fleeing the invaders night and day.

Look at the acts he has committed: Girls who are hardly in their teens
 Are huddled in a room and O . . . God only knows what that all means.
 On defenseless towns far from the line there falls a rain of shell and fire,—
 That's how this Pirate Lord of Asia now tries to WHIP the world entire!

Prepare! my Brothers! O prepare! for they are coming soon to you,
 To destroy your churches and your homes, —abuse your wives and
 daughters, too!
 O will you let them DO THESE THINGS . . . spread destruction on
 their way?
 Brothers! in the name of Peace—boycott Japan—and help China today!

In the poems *Stars and Stripes*, Solidum seems to be striving for compression. The poems are shorter, compact, less verbose. They evince an attempt to say much in as few words as possible. The fear of war is ever present, and to a man with the mindset of a colonially educated Filipino, America is neither conqueror nor tyrant, but a benevolent ruler who has brought democracy to the Philippines. He dreams of universal peace and brotherhood in "Freedom."

Freedom

Many have died for freedom's cause
That we may live and die,
Not as slaves to stronger men,
But their equals beneath the sky.
Not till aggressors and dictators
Have been summoned above,
Will men below ever come to know
Real, universal love.

For all his pro-America stance, Solidum betrays a dubious view of MacArthur's assessment of the political situation at the time and asserts, instead, that Japan's conquest of the Philippines precludes a conquest of the Filipinos' souls:

General MacArthur's View

"Japan won't conquer the Philippines,"
Says MacArthur, "For one reason or two:
It'll mean a half-million casualties,
And five billion dollars to rue."

And if Japan ever takes these isles,
Juan dela Cruz she'll never rule;
Perhaps a few of traitorous ilk—
Who'll make themselves her tool.

"The Battle of Manila Bay," a poem in the dramatic mode, objectifies the passive acceptance by the Filipino of the history he barely understands. And old man speaks as eyewitness of the arrival of the American fleet—"a line of things,/ And each looked like a tomb." He utters a prayer of forgiveness for the sons of Spain who "sucked our blood,/ And hollowed out our plains." He witnesses the mock battle when he wakes up the following morning to the

thunder of cannon fire. Through the thick smoke, he sees the waters rise and the ships of Spain blown to the skies. The old man is clearly on the side of America as he ends his narration of the American conquest with the admonition to remain loyal to the new rulers. It is a naive view of the American occupation, but it was the view of the majority of Filipinos brainwashed in the public schools to accept America's policy of benevolent assimilation.

The Battle of Manila Bay

"'Twas ten and thirty years ago."

I heard an old man say,

"When I was out a-fishing there

Upon that shiny bay.

And O the night was dark and still,

As still as it could be;

That I could hear the seagulls saying:

'O happiest are the free.'

"'Twas alone so I didn't mind,

For I was tired, you know."

And here the old man paused a while,

His eyes in radiant glow.

"But oh, my boy," the old man said,

"While I was paddling home,

I came across a line of things,—

And each looked like a tomb."

"And what were they?" spoke up the boy.

"O what were they?" he cried.

"Big ships with cannon—terrible!"

And here the old man sighed:

"O God forgive those black-robed friars,

Those tyrant sons of Spain,

Who bled our flesh and sucked our blood,

And hollowed out our plain."

Went on the hoary fisherman:

"Next morn I heard the sound

Of roaring guns inside the bay,

And smoke was all around.

And it was there where I first saw

That water rose so high—

As proud Spain's old men-of-war

Hovered under the sky.

Dewey had won the morning's fight,
And Spain forever lost
These treasures of the Orient seas,
The ones she prized the most.
And that was how that powerful Flag
Came to wave in our air, . . .
My son, let them never pull it down,
His story ended there.

"War" depicts the horrors suffered by "Mother World" as a result of the ceaseless conflict between nations. War is Hell—the Pit into which multitudes of men and beasts are hurled. War destroys the cities of the living and even those of the dead—"graveyards on fire." Special mention is made of mothers and babies, numerous as flies, whose lives are equally brief. War is the blood of men which becomes a flood that inundates the dying. War is an ocean full of corpses. And the persona can merely ask in a plaintive tone when all these horrors will end.

War

Without a warning came the Storm
That swept the Mother World,—
Creatures and beasts of every form
Into the Pit were hurled.

Then Thunder roared and Lightning flashed
Beneath the mournful sky,
Graveyards on fire, cities were crushed,
Airplanes were swooping by.

Mothers and babies crawled like flies,—
Like flies they passed away,
Only the ground could hear their cries
In dust they now lay.

And on the field there flowed the blood
Of sons and fathers lying,—
As red as wine, as swift as flood,—
Drowning those who were dying.

And on the bottom of the sea
How many souls there lie!
What a ghastly scene to see
Their bodies floating by!

When shall these tumults end
 This merciless warfare?
 This killing of son, father and friend,—
 On Land, and Sea, and Air?

Solidum assumes a contemplative tone in "Reverie," a poem dedicated to his friend, Ifor B. Powell, an authority in Southeast Asian history and politics. The persona is humbled by the thought of future generations surpassing his own in achievements, even as he points to the value—"the glitter of our gold"—his own generation will be handing over. He accepts the changes that will come, including the adoption of English by the young. The men of his generation cannot think of themselves as advanced because the men of the future will note their failure to visit Mars. He sees a future of continuing migration when families are alienated by geography, and people become citizens of the world. He hopes men will no longer segregate themselves into black and white and will learn to trust one another.

Reveries

*To my friend, Ifor B. Powell
 of Breconshire, Great Britain*

In my dream of coming changes,
 Like a shepherd I behold
 Not the golden rays of sunset,
 But the glitter of our gold.

Time will come our customs perish,
 Fashions new to us belong;
 What is now your foreign language,
 Will find its way in children's song.

All our wonders of the ages,
 Our achievements of the past,
 They are but a tiny fraction,
 Of the unseen—greater, vast.

Day by day we dream of power,
 Day by day we count the stars;
 But how tomorrow's men will say;
 Ah they failed to visit Mars!

And our children's children's children,
They will not each other know,
Some may live and die in Siam,
Some in Greece, in England, too!

Perhaps tomorrow's men will say:
Those who lived in ages past,
Drew a line between black and white,—
And could not each other trust.

In "A Song for Pablo Lazlo," Solidum proclaims himself a citizen of the world, a brother to all men, regardless of race. He claims no wisdom apart from his faith in a Power and the certainty of human mortality. He will live in a manner beneficial to himself and to others, just as the farmer plants alone and gives his carabao the freedom to roam after it has assisted him in the plowing. He does not intend to seek riches and power, since he knows how the mighty are debased by their greed. He prays for a virtuous life so that when he dies, he will be worthy of the burial plot he will occupy.

A Song for Pablo Lazlo

I am a son of the land and the sea,
And the great wide world is my home.
Every man who is good is a brother to me,
I ask not his race or the place he comes from.

A sage I am not, but one thing I know:
There is a Power, and Life on earth ends.
So all that I say, and all that I do,
Must be useful to me, likewise to my friends.

Today I am here, tomorrow I am gone,
Why waste my existence for glory and gold?
Shall the farmer not do his planting alone
And loose his carabao to wander in the fields?

Riches and power—since the birth of Time,
Have ruled the world with greedy hand,
It is the law in every land and clime,
The weak obey and the strong command.

Refrain

There are those who live forever,
 Some who live but for a day;
 The dreamers belong to the ages,
 The toilers are lost on the way.

And most of those in mansions grand,
 Are never worth a mound;
 So let me live that when I die
 I consecrate a ground.

"Endeavor" amplifies the theme of continuous toil so as not to waste the gift of life. It is a good example of the practical advice so prevalent in the poetry of Solidum's generation, a tendency Amador Daguió attributes to the didactic emphasis in nineteenth-century English and American poetry, which so influenced the Filipino poets of the early years of this century. It is sound counsel for those who postpone action, who wait idly for fortune's gifts and who rely too much on the visions of fortune tellers. An especially good image is that of the flower, in a season of drought, which stores the dew of each dawn.

Endeavor

Wait not for the ship that never comes,
 Plant tomorrow's grain today.
 Castles built in the air or sand,
 Will soon vanish away.

Forget the gypsy-fortune in your palms,
 A gold mine is in you.
 A flower still waiting for the rain,
 Should now gather the dew.

Conclusion

Procopio Solidum was just beginning to express his growing awareness of his society's shortcomings when he died. Daguió (1961, vii) describes Solidum's unrealized evolution as a poet, thus: "[H]is irritation at the growing hypocrisy, inconsistency, and even revolting villainy in the . . . life of the nation before the outbreak of World War II was becoming more open, and Solidum could have used his pen to prick many a current false and empty bubble today."

Following are two poems which verbalize the opinion of the common man on the posturing of his leaders.

Babson's Statistics

The Philippines' principal products
Are sugar and politicians.
In one there is money,
In the other extravagance.³

The Common People's Lot

Hark! the masses are speaking
To the world, for all time:
"Not we, but our leaders,
In lofty tones, sublime,
Cry for immediate independence,
Neutrality, and all that,
Without taking into account,
The common people's lot."

The student of Philippine literature must take note of the fact that Procopio Solidum wrote his verses at a time when Filipinos were just learning a new language. We can imagine the young boy delighting in the "musicality" of Poe, Keats, Burns, and Kipling. He was said to have "jung in his study the pictures of almost all the great American and English poets" (Gonzales 1922). A roomful of poets and a lone voice reciting their works—this was his "literary circle." Other Negrense poets would band together with poets from Panay in the organization *Sumakwelan*, if only to link up with kindred spirits and act as soundingboards for each other's poetry.

Solidum had a limited audience and he realized the fact shortly before he died, when he turned to his native tongue. He didn't live long enough to fulfill the promise of becoming truly a poet of his own people. *Ang Pagka Pilipinhon* remains an unknown and unread legacy which hopefully rests securely in the Manila Achieves.

A fitting conclusion to this survey of the poems of Procopio Solidum is the quatrain which asks the reader to accept his gift of song.

One sigh before I leave
Some lines before I go;
Comrades, my songs receive,
I give them all to you.

Notes

1. *Philippines Free Press*, 17 September 1921.
2. *Philippines Free Press*, 11 June 1921.
3. From a press statement of Roger W. Babson, president of the Babson Statistical Organization, who said: "The principal products of the islands now seem to be sugar and politicians, with the latter showing a good increase." Mr. Babson was in the Philippines in 1939.

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