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## **Man of Earth, by Abad and Manlapaz**

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MAN OF EARTH: AN ANTHOLOGY OF FILIPINO POETRY AND VERSE FROM ENGLISH, 1905 TO THE MID-50S. Edited by Gémino H. Abad and Edna Z. Manlapaz. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1989. xviii + 433 pages.

An anthology is always welcome, for it provides information which is crucial to definitions and self-definitions. Gémino Abad and Edna Manlapaz first gave us *Index to Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950* (National Book Store, 1988), an awesome reference volume. Culled from those 10,000 poems, now we have this anthology shaped by their aesthetics, most articulately Abad's. Product of prodigious efforts, this is. The volume is valuable for, as anthologies do, it brings together what were in disparate publications, and expresses as well the shape of a poetic bias. One need not adduce from the collection the aesthetic views which went into its formulation. Abad provides this in his introduction, entitled "Rereading Past Writ." It is full of the discriminations, analyses, and witty asides one has come to expect from this poet/critic.

The introduction takes up 24 pages, the poems 218 (80 poets arranged according to date of birth, and their 330 poems numbered accordingly), the annotations 171 (notes on the principal sources 12, notes on the poems 101, biographical notes 58); finally, two indices, one on the poems cited but not in the text proper, and one of the poets and their poems. The volume is handy both as to size and ease of cross-references.

The facility of a historical approach can be a trap. Poets do write outside of their milieu. They can be in it and yet not of it. The mystery of language can be traced on a historical axis, but that would not explain the poem. Anyway, all such explanations end up really being just about the poem. Still that is precisely what history is — it locates the poem in a matrix of concrete events. What is probably inexplicable on purely historical grounds is how the Filipino poet could write "I am alone . . . / Away from you, so far away" (1914, Fernando Ma. Guerrero, "Where is My May?") at the start of our writing in English, and "I can no more hear love's / voice" (1942, Jose Garcia Villa, "I Can No More Hear Love's") after only twenty-eight years. The handling of both language and emotion differ greatly. One is full of language—language for description; the other utilizes language to evoke states, states that define absence. The biographical notes, some of them lushly written, provide clues, a modicum of understanding.

What does one discover, seeing side by side the poems of our first half-century of writing in English? On the vocabulary level, indigenous words never quite succeed in producing echoes even within the poem. They remain only inert reference points: "scent of azucena" (poem 15, M. de Garcia Concepcion, "Ili-na"); "pink makahiya" (poem 37, Natividad Marguez, "Requiem"). Non-Tagalog words are like fancy unknown Hong Kong flowers: "Fair itubi is courted by *luran*" (Fernando Maramag, "Cagayano Peasant Songs"); "his *ilina*" (Concepcion, cited above); "beating their pakkongs" (poem 17, Concepcion, "Silent Trails"), "bamboo *lawig* (poem 300, Manuel E. Buenafe, "Inay Bunka's Love Tale"). They function like some kind of house adornment — meretricious

but devoid of sense. These words fail to enter the organic, poetic vocabulary of our English poems.

In contrast the imagery of some poems coalesces into an organic unity: mullioned pane, carved, glassed, bread and wine, cathedral, aureoled flame, blackened spires (poem 61, Angela C. Manalang-Gloria, "Soledad") — image encaging a life, the stern integrity of a life defined by its love impassionate. Manalang-Gloria is an original — alone, unequalled. Despite her own dismissal of her early poems, they are achievements in language: "wave-born dew" (poem 60, "But The Western Stars"), "As trees long rooted to the earth *uprear* / their quickening leaves and flowers to the sun" (emphasis mine, poem 62, "To The Man I Married"), "thin cerements of rain" (poem 63, "Cementerio del Norte"), "books I ravished by the censored score" (poem 64, "Change") — every poem in fact a felicitous phrase, a wonder enthralling. She not only masters her craft, her lines sing.

The poems when they succeed do so because of the interaction, interpenetration, collision of the images. Each echoes till the whole poem resonates, a whole. When they refer to the world outside of the poem they often fail — as do those with indigenous words. English, as the language of our poetry, cannot carry the contiguity/continuity of our holistic experiences. It cannot glide from politics to aesthetics. Poets end up making propagandistic statements: "WE ARE THE REVOLUTION!" (poem 260, Carlos Bulosan, "If You Want To Know What We Are") or writing lines like "Philippines minus (Spain plus America) equals / MOLAVE" (poem 196, section XVII, Rafael Zulueta da Costa, "Like the Molave"). There is a conspicuous dearth of fowl, flora, and fauna, the stuff of objective correlatives. The poems are a world apart. When they do succeed they do against great odds.

The use of English causes retardation in some. It would be quite unthinkable for a twenty-five-year-old to write silly love poems, but there are two in this volume, A. E. Litiatco's "Paradox" (poem 90), and Cornelio Faigao's "Code" (poem 75):

Whether I dwell within the heart of you,  
     I must know.  
 Tomorrow when the daylight lights the sky,  
     Words must fly.  
 On your window — three potted loveliness,  
     Meaning Yes.  
 Or two flower pots their green beauty show,  
     Meaning No.  
 The sunbeams gleam upon your window sill;  
     All is still.  
 A row of flowers fair, each one a gem;  
     Five of them!

It seems that the use of a foreign tongue entitles one to claim arrest of normal growth.

A more considerate way of dealing with our English poems would be to cluster them around themes: love, freedom and democracy, nationalism, nature

(evocation of), remembrances of things past, politics, religion, occasions (such as Christmas and National Heroes' Day). Emphasis on content, therefore, not style. Love dominates, as it does in Tagalog poetry, local movies, pop songs especially OPM, local soap operas on TV and radio, and komiks. Themes cross language barriers. It would in fact be useful to compare this anthology with similar ones in Tagalog.

In terms of achievement one cannot speak of "My, proud, geography" (poem 222, Jose Garcia Villa, "Aphorisms," section III) since there are very, very few "peaks" (Manalang Gloria, Villa) and almost all are precipices. The anthology is a good source book for valiant attempts. But it could form the base for a tradition, since for the first time, what had heretofore been "lying dead" in archives are brought together. They do not spark into life, but they are good anthropological data. For that and other uses (historical, linguistic, educational, for instance) we have the assiduous editors to thank.

*Edilberto N. Alegre*

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