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**Alberto S. Florentino (ed.),  
The Essential Arcellana**

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moted the export of Filipino labor. And today, their successors remain alert to these horrific habits, as they watch a bunch of clowns in Congress and the Executive branch send us into the economic abyss. One may score political points by “blaming imperialism” for the exodus of Filipina nurses, but one cannot absolve the Filipinos who claim to be our leaders. Two: what of those who decided to go back—those professionals whom nationalists and nativists praise to high heavens?

Ceniza-Choy is silent on these *balikbayans* simply because they are marginal to Filipino-American history. But flows of people are not just a one-way process. The book itself acknowledges some nurses did go home. In ignoring this group—admittedly a miniscule but nevertheless important cluster—the book misses an opportunity to overcome a deep-rooted provincialism in American studies by deploying the powerful lens of comparative historical inquiry.

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Alberto S. Florentino (ed.), **The Essential Arcellana**. Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2002. 161 pages.

In the Philippines, where many literary works—even those authored by major writers and especially those published before the Second World War—remain uncollected in newspapers and magazines stored in select libraries and private collections, samplers or readers are vital. They are building blocks from which a national canon is constructed and a conduit by which a literary tradition is passed down to future generations of writers and readers.

In the case of Philippine literature in English, there is probably nobody more prolific at making samplers than Alberto S. Florentino, who since the 1960s has been preserving and disseminating the works of major Filipino writers in compact and generally affordable forms, and

for which activity he deserves credit. In *The Essential Arcellana*, he gathers together two poems, ten essays and articles, and nine short stories of the late National Artist Francisco Arcellana. It is a slim but significant volume, with a holograph reproduction of a dedication by Arcellana, a script on his life written by his son Juaniyo, and a review by Leonard Casper of *The Francisco Arcellana Sampler*, which was, as Florentino observes, the "first [and only] clothbound edition of an Arcellana book" (p. ix). Along with that now out-of-print sampler, Florentino's new compilation is an invaluable resource in any assessment of Arcellana's achievement.

The two poems are presented as part of the preliminaries, perhaps because Arcellana, by his own admission, was less accomplished in poetry than in prose. "Before Tertullian, After Him" is a reflection on the relationship between body and soul. "Salon, Shalom" borders on the whimsy, being a pastiche of passages from Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Jose Garcia Villa, and other writers.

The essays and articles reveal Arcellana's engagement in various literary questions, some of which still concern many writers, as for example, the proper involvement of the artist in national politics or the distinctions between prose and poetic discourses. On the whole, they make interesting reading. Florentino's selections, however, come from the 1950s onwards. Thus, missing are the essays Arcellana wrote at the height of the so-called Villa-Lopez controversy of the 1930s, possibly the single most important debate in Philippine literature in English.

What Florentino does include is "MEA," Arcellana's tribute to Manuel E. Arguilla, who worked as an undercover agent against the Japanese during the Second World War and was eventually arrested and executed by them. From this essay, readers can infer Arcellana's stance in the debate between Villa's art for art sake and Salvador P. Lopez's "proletarian literature." Writes Arcellana: "I shall never be able to forgive him [Arguilla] his patriotism. He was no patriot. He was a writer. He was a writer of short stories. He should have left patriotism alone. He should have left patriotism to others. We have many patriots. We don't have too many writers" (p. 15). The view is reiterated in "The Filipino Writer and Political Action," which argues that "it is likely that it is the highest possible good to be useful: it is certain that it is less than good to be used or to allow

oneself, wittingly or unwittingly, to be used" (p. 23) and that a writer "is first a human being before he is a national" (p. 24).

"Filipino Writing in English" and "American Influence in Philippine Literature" are Arcellana's apologia for Philippine literature in English. There are two functions of writing, he argues: first, "to interpret us to ourselves" and second, "to interpret us to others" (p. 46). The Filipino writer in English performs the second function, which is just as legitimate as the first and which "at the rate the world is shrinking and boundaries are disappearing . . . may be the more important part after all" (p. 46).

These essays invite discussion now as they did then and cannot be merely dismissed. Is it possible, for instance, to separate the task of interpreting "us to ourselves" and interpreting "us to others"? Have Filipino writers in English indeed possessed the English language, as Arcellana claims, instead of being possessed by it? And how valid is the logic behind the statement that "to resist political action is an act of the highest possible political implication" (p. 23)?

The other essays are important as records of early Philippine literature in English. In "Period of Emergence: The Short Story," for example, we find a litany of the significant writers and their works from the 1920s and the 1930s. "The Carabao with Wings: A Study of Filipino Poetry in English" is both a critique of a review of Villa's *Selected Poems and New* by English poet Thom Gunn and a survey of Philippine poetry from the 1920s to the 1950s.

It is, however, the short stories for which Arcellana will be remembered. On reading them, one discards the notion that it takes a novel to make a fictionist great (Gregorio Brillantes and Arguilla come readily to mind). The short stories show Arcellana's profound understanding of love and death (his twin thematic obsessions), expressed in a distinct prose style, which is variously childlike, lyrical, and oracular. The wonder is that many of the short stories were written in the 1930s and 1940s, when Arcellana was in his youth. The "Trilogy of Turtles," the earliest in the group, was published when he was nineteen. The stories are the essence of *The Essential Arcellana*, and it is a pity that Florentino did not include more of them.

Two of the best stories explore the experience of grief in all its stark inexorability. In "The Mats," possibly Arcellana's best-known story,

a father brings home mats for each of his children, "with . . . names woven into them, and in . . . ascribed colors, too" (p. 96), but he brings three more with him, one for each of his dead children. The *memento mori* theme is repeated in "The Flowers of May," written thirteen years later, where the setting serves to heighten the sense of loss. There is again a family. A year has passed since the death of a child. The children return home after picking flowers, and as the mother arranges them, the father shatters the calm:

"The flowers are gone. The flowers of May are gone. I saw that Victoria did not want to die. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing one could do," Father says helplessly.

His grief is terrible and deep.

It is as terrible as the naked terror stark in Mother's eyes and deep as the new knowledge and first and final and only wisdom that we have just now begun to share. *So this is death. So this is what it means to die.* And for the first time since she died and we buried her, we learn to accept the fact of Victoria's death finally, we know at last that Victoria is dead—really and truly dead. (p. 120)

How Arcellana takes the reader from his quiet openings to the climax, without resorting to melodramatic tricks, is masterly.

The other stories in the collection include "The Yellow Shawl," a harrowing recollection of the War; "Divide by Two," a subtle study of denial and projection, the tensions simmering beneath surfaces conveyed almost entirely through dialogue; and "Christmas Gift," a specimen of the early Arcellana story featuring inarticulate, tremulous protagonists (usually young men) on the verge of some momentous experience.

Judging from *The Essential Arcellana*, the late National Artist's output may not be as thick an output as that of other writers, but neither is it less compelling. It is therefore fortunate that there is *The Essential Arcellana* to ensure that yet another generation of Filipino readers can sample his art and, it is hoped, see its merits.

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