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The Temper of the Times: A Critical Introduction

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**The Temper of the Times:
A Critical Introduction**
ALICE G. GUILLERMO

This special issue on new writing at once raises initial questions. First is the question of time frame. *New* being a flexible word, it could cover a limited span such as last year's production or else it could be applied to works of the past ten years or so, which is indeed the case in this present collection. The second question involves the choice of 1972 (approximately) as the starting point for the selection. Surely, 1972 as the year of the declaration of martial law is not only a historically significant date. It is also of inescapable political import—a fact which this anthology cannot possibly ignore. Such observations as these inevitably lead to the problem of the relationship between literature, art and culture on the one hand, and political, social, and economic forces on the other.

It is precisely an anthology such as this, proffering a wide sampling of literary work done during the period which significantly coincides with the intensifying national crisis, that clearly shows the relation between the literary art, or art in general, and social reality. To the questions: Is art a suprahistorical expression? Does it hold a position of absolute autonomy with respect to other areas of human practice? Can the artist indefinitely maintain an ahistorical, apolitical stance? this anthology provides illumination. What becomes a matter of absorbing interest is how the individual writers have formed their responses, if not actively related to the ongoing crisis that has in so many ways affected our lives and engaged us. And after knowing the quality of their response, one would have to face the question of the role of the writer and artist and that of the function of his art.

From these examples, as well as from the more recent anthologies, among them, the *Galian* poetry collections, *In Memoriam*, *Caracoa V*, *Filipina I*, *Mga Tula ng Rebolusyong Pilipino*, from poems appearing in the *Diliman Review*, *Philippine Panorama*, and the now defunct *Who* magazine, as from the individual collections of poetry, short stories, and novels, there emerges a distinctly perceptible and growing trend toward a literary production reflective of a historical and sociopolitical consciousness. This is true of the young poets who have appeared in the last five years as for the many older poets who have consistently practiced their art for more than a decade now.

Doubtless, literature of sociopolitical content, which includes protest poetry and revolutionary literature, took shape in the early sixties and came to a head during the militant climate of the First Quarter Storm of 1970. Organizations such as the PAKSA popularized the premises of the new people's literature and encouraged work along these lines in order to provide models.

With the declaration of martial law and the repressive measures that attended it, members of these organizations took cover and in time issued underground politico-cultural publications. At the same time, a large number of writers and artists left the city for the countryside in order to lay the foundations for a new social structure, its art and culture nurtured in the bosom of the people. In the city, legal publications were closed for a period, and the traditional avenues of expression were frozen. When publications resumed — now under crony ownership — the cultural situation remained forbidding for the politicized artist and writer.

Meanwhile, the State which, at that time, had huge economic resources at its command, initiated a program of art patronage (headed by the First Lady in her assumed role as patroness of the arts) and initiated a policy of attraction directed to artists in all fields. This policy was manifested in glittering state receptions, awards of recognition, positions in the state cultural and propaganda machinery, and of course, in terms of generous monetary incentives. Such calculated largesse did not pass entirely unnoticed or unappreciated. Proof of such cognizance came in the form of a couple of "epics" whose authors were rather hard put to justify their contemporary provenance—productions which formed the core of a court poetry which the regime encouraged for the legitimacy that the country's intellectuals and artists could bestow.

Instead of the literature of struggle and protest which arose in unison with the other countries of the Third World, the state encouraged a bloodless, decorous, and technically proficient poetry, often academic: poetry in the art-for-art's-sake aesthetic. Such a school cultivated a formalism in language with a tendency to linguistic mannerism and recondite preciousness. But if, however, the poets, artists, and writers could not quite shed the militant themes of the First Quarter Storm, well then, there was always nationalism to fall back on, particularly in the state-sponsored variety which sought to unify the people under the banner of tradition and ethnicity in the spirit of a militant euphoria singing hosannas to the strongman.

Yet, through this same decade, writers and artists found that they could not long divorce themselves from the historical process. The ivory tower was becoming too cold and bare, with momentous events happening in the world outside, appealing for their response and participation. Reports of the deaths of friends, of writers and artists engaged in the armed struggle in the countryside set tremors of shock in the city. Just below the seemingly placid surface of urban life was the heightening conflict made acute by militarization and the violations of human rights.

An assessment of the literary situation from the seventies to the eighties therefore, has to reckon with certain groupings that developed during the period. In the city, literature has been actively produced in both English and Pilipino. Novels and collections of poems and short stories have come out in both languages: Bautista's *Dekada '70*, Rio Alma's *Doktrinang Anak Pawis*, Lacaba's *Ang Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Juan de la Cruz*, Maranan's *Alab*, Nick Joaquin's *Cave and Shadows*, Sionil Jose's *Mass* and *Platinum*, Salanga's *Birthing of Hannibal Valdez*, Bautista's *Telex Moon*, Marra Lanot's *Passion and Compassion*, to mention a few. In poetry in English, notable publications include *Jose* and *Caracoa*, the poetry journal of the Philippine Literary Arts Council. In these literary journals, the general orientation has been on the craft itself, a virtuosity of language and a wide range of cultural allusions, the traditional marks of the expressions of the literati, all honed to capture exquisite and evanescent subjective experience—until recently, of course, when *Caracoa* came out with its *Sub Versu* issue of poetry in protest. Outside these venues, writers have contributed stories and poems to a few publications such as

FOCUS, *Panorama*, and the defunct *Observer* and *Who*, which had consistently been sympathetic to sociopolitical themes. At the same time, the writers of the literature of protest who either could not find accommodation in established venues because of the strictures of censorship or who ignored these venues altogether, created their own forums, perhaps limited in resources, but of a free, radical, and multisectoral character.

There has also been a clear trend among socially committed writers, some former English majors brought up on a staple of Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, to gradually make the shift from English to Pilipino. And it is at this point that the issue of language comes in. This shift may not in itself constitute a rejection of English as a medium of writing and communication (on the grounds that it is of colonial introduction), for the concern over the clear transmission of ideas takes precedence over the language issue, in recognition of the fact that Philippine audiences differ in communication needs. Doubtless, it is the nationalistic desire to contribute to a vital and progressive literature in the language of the broad masses that here plays a central role. For ideas of a social and political import, those that seek the active assent of the larger population in order to effect change, call for the effective and eloquent use of the native tongue, in Pilipino as well as in the regional languages. The writer is thereby challenged to create a new literature stripped of the onus of feudal traditions, the preciousness of regional archaisms, the commercially exploited vulgarities, and the stock formulas of stereotyped magazine writing. The writer is challenged to create an art marked by freshness and sincerity because culled from the experience of the people's struggle and the vision of a truly human and just order. Thus, the Pilipino writer's use of the language goes beyond sentimental populism and ethnic pride, so easily manipulated to serve the ends of the regime. It must, in fact, be addressed to a genuine political position, in much the same way that nationalism needs to transcend the mystique of ethos and race in order to achieve a political unity safeguarding the people's interests vis-a-vis neocolonial control with the complicity of the ruling elite.

Since the mid-seventies, most young writers in Pilipino have come under the umbrella of the *Galian ng Arte at Tula* (GAT). For one thing, many young poets, playwrights and fictionists

writing in Pilipino have shown a sympathy for social issues in a writing often characterized by social consciousness, as the GAT anthologies have shown. This may be easily taken for granted on the assumption that writers in Pilipino have always enjoyed a closer grass-roots relationship with the masses of peasants and workers. While this may be true in principle, still one only needs to be reminded of the long tradition of escapist writing in Pilipino in widely-circulated magazines which have largely bypassed social issues and have catered to the still surviving folk penchant for romantic fantasies or for plain pornography. It is to the credit of the GAT that its members have rejected these directions and have developed a socially aware literature drawn from both urban and rural experience. Because of their closeness to social reality, the short stories in Pilipino—some of the best of which have been written by women writers such as Liwayway Bautista and Fanny Garcia—have a courageous toughness and honest directness of tone along with a solid grasp of the idioms and patterns of the language. At the same time, many GAT writers, being university-bred, show the influence of foreign literary styles in their work, as well as a highly conscious concern for technique. Doubtless, their principal virtue will always lie in the immersion in the social environment, without which a perceptible discrepancy may emerge between the use of the native language, on the one hand, and on the other the consciousness which may reflect an alien sensibility or viewpoint translated into the language of the masses.

The GAT, however, is a small city-based group. In the large Philippine countryside, the peasants in recent years have developed a body of culture, including songs, poems, stories, and visual forms linking the different regions by their common interests and aspirations. Efforts have been made to collect this material in Pilipino and the vernaculars, among which are *Mga Tula ng Rebolusyong Pilipino*, *Ang Magsasaka: Bayaning Di-Kilala* and *Ulos*. In this burgeoning culture of struggle, the urban artist and writer may play a significant part by enlarging his range of experience and by interacting with the peasants with whom he may share his literary training.

The same holds true for the urban writer in English who as artist needs to situate himself in the social setting and the historical process, if he is concerned about avoiding the gray no-man's land of an alienated, if not colonial, sensibility. Certainly,

this is not to deny the existence of a universal fund of human understanding and feeling in which artists of all countries seek common ground for fruitful exchange. Yet the universal is nevertheless crystallized from the specificities of time and place, of locale, culture, and history that form distinct but dynamic configurations that shape a continually evolving national identity. And then, too, how is the universal to be construed? Often enough, what is unwittingly thought of as universal is the Western (Euro-American) point of view and sensibility which bears First World values and interests and becomes easy prey to their economic and cultural designs. This fosters or perpetuates the anomaly of the writer in a neocolonial situation consciously or unconsciously perpetrating an outlook that is alien, if not inimical, to his own people.

Obviously, from a survey of recent literary productions, urban artists have not been able to escape the pressures of current history in the intensifying economic and political crisis. A clear turning point for many writers and poets in English was the assassination of former senator Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. As a result of this incident, protest—which had earlier been timid or diffuse—now became full and orchestrated. And whereas earlier, rallies and other mass actions had been composed mainly of students and workers, now the bourgeoisie of the Makati enclaves, including rich society matrons, took to the streets, haute couture chic notwithstanding, in an unprecedented show of oppositionist fervor. Likewise, the visual arts and literature formed a swelling tide of protest centered around the figure of Aquino.

A collection of poetry in English to come out of the crisis was *In Memoriam: A Poetic Tribute by Five Filipino Poets* namely, Gemino H. Abad, Cirilo F. Bautista, Alfredo Navarro Salanga, Ricardo M. de Ungria, and Alfred Yuson. More than anything else, this collection proves that our poets in English cannot long maintain a rigidly formalistic stance but will, sooner or later, recognize the pressures of reality on their art. This also holds true for a later collection, *Caracoa V*, a collection of poetry in protest published by the Philippine Literary Arts Council. On the feminist front, the Women Writers in Media Now came up with *Filipina I*, a collection of creative writing in English and Pilipino. The GAT poets came up with *Galian, Mga Tula sa Panahon ng Krisis*. From

the countryside came the poetry anthology, *Mga Tula ng Rebolusyong Pilipino*.

These collections together reflect the temper of the times—at the same time that they represent a wide spectrum of social and political response. No doubt, the fact that these works in fiction and poetry touch on the issues and events of the time invites a critical approach that goes beyond considerations of form alone to an analysis of meaning and content. At the very least, much of recent writing, such as the poems in *Caracoa V (Sub Versu)* and *In Memoriam*, tends to insinuate into the audience attitudes and values for or against certain sociopolitical issues in a general way. They do create a palpable climate of protest, sometimes uneasy and petulantly fractious, but without losing elegance. In the most recent poetry in English, there is a notable and interesting tendency, on the part of one or two poets, to go beyond the concerns of style in the familiar sense of semantic refinement, and to engage in style as an exploration of syntax, phonological properties and tonal dynamics in order to pry out new levels of meaning from apparently simple forms. As to content, the range of these collections covers the poetry of a diffuse and unfocused malaise, poetry seeking a center for its politics, expressions of anarchic energy hitting right and left but comfortably settling into the ego, as well as those in which protest becomes political confrontation in life as in art.

Doubtless, the vigor of protest literature lies in the sharpening of the artist's perceptions of the issues involved, with protest that goes beyond the purely personal to the public, a concrete audience to which the writer makes appeal. Thus, sharply honed and focused, the literature of protest that is the predominant cultural manifestation of the times will not be a merely diffuse and sporadic phenomenon, but a formidable gathering of voices, of the city as of the countryside, signifying that the people at last have spoken.