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The Social Consciousness of R. Zulueta da Costa

GEORGINA A. REYES

Zulueta da Costa's *Like the Molave* is one work in Philippine literature that has evoked a variety of responses, mostly conflicting and contradictory. It was identified at one time as the foremost poetic expression of Filipinism. It has also been considered an example of the failure of Filipino writing in English. When the poem was first published and won the Commonwealth Literary Award in 1940, it was met with a shower of extravagant praise by both writers and critics alike. Carlos P. Romulo, the chairman of the Board of Judges for the contest, was exuberant in his appraisal of the poem. According to him:

Filipino poetry in English is beginning to be infused with a social and cultural significance. The lyric voice of the Filipino poet has acquired a deeper and more resounding timber suggestive of an emotion that has been touched by the intelligence into significant passion.¹

Some years later, Armando Manalo, another Filipino writer, called the poem "the most significant comment on and possibly the most ambitious criticism of Filipino society set in an imaginative vehicle . . . R. da Costa's vision of unalienated justice triumphing at last has the unmistakable ring of prophecy."² Most ecstatic in his assessment of the poem's worth and importance in the development of Philippine literature was S.P. Lopez, in answer to whose exhortation for more social consciousness in literature the poem had in fact been written. In his introduction to da Costa's book of collected poems, S.P. Lopez hailed *Like the Molave* as a "glowing celebration of the national destiny, an eloquent statement of Filipinism" and claimed that the poet has "the rare equipoise which is only to be found in artist minds of the highest order: perfect

1. Quoted on the back cover of R. Zulueta da Costa, *Like the Molave and Collected Poems* (Manila: Carmelo & Bauermann, Inc., 1940).

2. *Ibid.*

sanity within the inexplicable domain of genius.”³

On the other hand, the poem has been attacked by Leonard Casper and Ricaredo Demetillo who have subjected it to more rigorous standards of criticism. Casper in *New Writing from the Philippines* takes S.P. Lopez to task for his proletarian theory of literature and consequently for his choice of a Filipino masterpiece:

Unfortunately, *Like the Molave* shows less restraint than evasiveness. . . its sentiments are abstract, its allegories, trite, its repetitions, monotonous, its sarcasm, obvious, its rhetoric, theatrical, its lack of self-knowledge, appalling.⁴

And Ricaredo Demetillo in *The Authentic Voice of Poetry*, delivers a more scathing blow to the poem:

But I plead the work should not be passed off as poetry for only in the hinterlands of Philistinian will the yokels mistake this rant and bathos for the miraculous finality that is poetry.⁵

A compilation of such critical comments as this dramatically illustrates the shifting literary tastes of a people and of critical standards for a developing literature such as ours. More significantly, it compels us to focus our attention on some of the most basic questions relating to Philippine literature. What makes literature “Filipino”? What makes it good or great Filipino literature? What standards should critics use to judge the merits and demerits of literature that claims to be socially conscious? Is it good because the writer attempts to write on a theme such as patriotism, national identity, or social justice? because it mirrors Filipino conditions, scenes, and virtues? because it reflects the temper of its time? because it makes literature a tool in the upliftment of socioeconomic conditions? These questions are all engaging and worthwhile areas of study for the student and critic of Philippine literature.

I have limited myself to the idea of social consciousness as it informs and is reflected in da Costa’s poem *Like the Molave*. Criticism of this work as exemplified by the statements of S.P. Lopez, Romulo, and Manalo has, like much early Filipino literary

3. Introduction to R. Zulueta da Costa, *Like the Molave and Collected Poems* (Manila: Carmelo and Bauermann, Inc., 1940), p. 11. All future references to the poem in the text are taken from this edition.

4. Leonard Casper, *New Writing from the Philippines* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), p. 11.

5. Ricaredo Demetillo, *The Authentic Voice of Poetry* (Quezon City: Office of Research Coordination Publishers, 1962), p. 331.

criticism, tended to be sweeping and impressionistic. Other critics like Demetillo and Casper have impatiently dismissed the poem or lumped it along with their tirades on S.P. Lopez and other writers obsessed with the social function of literature. Perhaps da Costa deserves to be given only so much attention. But when he is upheld as the genius of the thirties or chosen to represent the Philippines in international anthologies, he invites at the very least a second look. By taking into consideration the historical and social background in which *Like the Molave* was written and analyzing his work in this context, I hope to locate da Costa and his period in our national literature more accurately.

At the outset, it is useful to keep in mind the landmarks of that period, 1930-1940. The stranglehold of the Americans over us, established in 1898, was still the foremost historical fact. It was essentially a period of transition during which the Commonwealth government was formed to prepare us for independence. Under the charismatic leadership of Quezon, Filipinos were called upon to feel their responsibility for asserting the country's self-reliance as a nation. This impassioned wave of nationalism was reflected in all aspects of Filipino life — government, education, and culture. And it was resoundingly mirrored in the developments in that literary period called "the period of emergence."

For the first time in the Philippines, an attempt to consolidate all Filipino writers into one organization known as the Philippine Writers' League, was made. It was this group which promulgated the code of the socially involved writers. In their constitution and manifestos, they affirmed the writer's commitment to "lend his arm to the struggle against injustice and oppression in every form in order to preserve those culture values which generations of writers before him have built up with social and painful effort."⁶ The support for this grand aim was provided by Quezon. In 1935, he established the Institute of National Language to hasten the development of a national tongue. In 1939, he approved a budget of ₱42,000 a year for the Commonwealth Literary Awards, to encourage the production of a national literature. The contest's objective was explicitly nationalistic: "to encourage creative works that record or interpret the contemporary scene and that deal with the

6. Manuel Arguilla et al., eds., *Literature under the Commonwealth* by Manuel L. Quezon, Carlos P. Romulo, Salvador P. Lopez et al. (Philippine Writers' Guild, 1940), p. 57.

social and economic problems of the individual and society over and above those that are merely concerned with fantasy, mysticism and speculation.”⁷

From the documents of the Philippine Writers' Guild which took charge of the contest and the spirited exchange of opinions among A. E. Litiatco, Arturo Rotor, Carlos P. Romulo, and S. P. Lopez on the role of literature, two definitions of social consciousness can be formulated. The first, associated with Rotor, was the insistence on the use of native and not Western materials as the subject of literature. Rotor decried the imitation by Filipino writers of foreign models and their neglect or ignorance of Filipino history, folklore, and current problems such as the social unrest of peasants in Central Luzon or the slum problem in Tondo. The second and later definition of social consciousness propounded by S. P. Lopez was the deliberate choice and handling of materials showing the writer's awareness of his society's socioeconomic problems and his involvement in the alleviation of these ills. Thus, in advocating the use of literature to effect social change, Lopez subordinated technique and language to the social message or content of the work.

What Arguilla and Juan Laya tried to do in their fiction, da Costa set out to do in poetry. For attempting this at all, the twenty-five-year old writer could be commended. It was no small ambition to turn away from the traditional themes of love, nature, and the beauty and innocence of idyllic rural life and to write about the contemporary scene in a foreign language and the free verse technique introduced by Whitman. *Like the Molave* has as its theme the greatness of the Filipino nation. It is a grandiose celebration of a socially awakened Filipino race, cognizant of its heritage, and imbued with the passion to realize the vision for which Rizal and other national heroes died. The well-known invocation to the national martyr, in the elevated declamatory style with which the poem begins, expresses the theme:

Not yet, Rizal, not yet. Sleep not in peace;
 There are a thousand waters to be spanned;
 There are a thousand mountains to be crossed:
 There are a thousand crosses to be borne

.....

7. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

This is an inventory of national failings, stated in the daily language of the people. Note how the words are calculated to stress what the poet considers the foibles and harmful national characteristics: the colloquial *soft* and *easy-going* are placed side by side with the more formal words *inconstant*, *indolent*, and *inefficient* which have graver implications. The passage itself conveys a formlessness that suggests society's amorphous shape and lack of direction. The catalogue becomes emphatic with the repetition of *in*, a variation on the negation theme. Elsewhere, he pointedly calls attention to the absence of concerted national effort through questions such as this one:

The government builds for progress.
 The capitalist builds for more capital.
 The architect builds for achievement.
 The engineer builds for enterprise.
 The holy one builds for the glory of God,
 What does the worker build for? [XIII, p. 37]

Note how he uses the platitudes of his age, with its preoccupation with glittering generalities as *progress*, *capital*, *enterprise*. These are all foreign concepts used to dupe a gullible race. There is emphasis on the separateness in the age of specialization, as suggested by the segregation of the lines from one another, even as they repeat a kind of refrain.

Da Costa's spirit of affirmation is simply expressed by his apotheosis of the common man, the "god walking on brown legs" [XIII, p. 36]. Like Sandburg, he "peers into the humanity of daily wage earners . . . rehearses the drama of diggers, pile drivers, riveters, masons, woodworkers and painters" [XIII, p. 36]. To him, they represent the force that will accomplish the gigantic task of purging the present system of its anomalies and of creating a genuine Filipino nation. They need no covenant to bind them to one another for they are bound by natural ties of humanity. Thus, da Costa praises those who, in their anonymity, are unknowingly serving society's ends. And because society is blind to their vast potential, da Costa sees fit to satirize it:

Some day, some enterprising publisher will
 visualize the business
 possibilities of human concern in the humble,
 and resolve to uplift, inspire, elevate the
 people with a rotogravure of the man in the

fields at his noonday tomato and rice;
 the fisherman hauling his net;
 the policeman beating his beat;
 the teacher bent over lesson plans;
 the hospital doctor and the nurse asking not;
 race? color? creed?
 the clerk at his constant figures;
 the workers waist-deep in mud;
 the miners, choking in gold-dust –
 yes, the living heroes, blue-penciled,
 wastebasketed, heaped on dumping ground. [VIII, p. 29]

In this catalogue of workers reminiscent of Whitman's long, sweeping enumerations of American laborers, craftsmen, and intellectuals, da Costa asserts the value of communal effort in a growing nation. In an ideal society, such as the one envisioned here, class barriers would be completely done away with. On the other hand, the contrast between *uplift*, *inspire*, *elevate* – suggestive of upward motion – and of *wastebasketed*, *blue-penciled* and *heaped* – signifying downward motion – which provides the verbal frame for da Costa's ideal society, calls attention to the wide gap between the capitalists, or those who would reduce people to business possibilities, and the workers. Da Costa tries to suggest the accumulation of verbs and people.

Several observations may be made of the passages I have cited. One is the tendency of da Costa to view all Filipino life in a very general manner. He thinks in terms of classes of persons, places, and things. One notes his detachment from such scenes which we might call Filipino landmarks. For all its apparent inclusiveness or wideness of scope, *Like the Molave* does not actually provide realistic descriptions of recognizably Filipino scenes, places, or events. Da Costa hears the profanities that pass for prayers at Quiapo and Antipolo. He mentions the detail of red flags in Pampanga, but his eye does not observe the vivid reality of these, nor does his imagination transform his raw materials into distinctive portraits of Filipino life. This is well illustrated by the following lines:

From hinterland holes and seacoasts, barrio wastes
 and city slums they come;
 From profound darkness they come rubbing their
 eyes in the light of government.

From schoolrooms, factories, offices, mine holes

and sewers they come;
 From pits of drugged sleep they emerge remembering
 wild dreams of angry winds;
 On the tides of dark and light they stand with brave
 assertions. [IX, p. 30]

This exemplifies the evasiveness which Casper accuses da Costa of. He proposes to uncover the truth, to strip reality, and to resist the temptation to sugarcoat it for his fellowmen. But he himself is often guilty of disappearing into platitudes and other vague phrases. The opening line of the stanza which provides very meager specification of place immediately weakens the passage. There is a false note about the words *hinterland holes* which must have been dictated more by the sound rather than by the sense for it is much too prosaic. *Barrio wastes* and *city slums* are also superficial-sounding and betray the writer's failure to capture the actual seediness and filth of both.

This enumeration is followed by still another enumeration in another passage of the same section, making the lines sound repetitious and monotonous. But what most confounds da Costa's work is his frequent use of a blanket of abstractions to feign profundity: for example, "profound darknesses" and "light of government." Why should *hinterland holes* be "profound"? And the image "light of government" does not illuminate at all. When he tries to express the masses' anger, he sinks into even more melodramatic and trite phrases — "drugged sleep, remembering wild dreams and angry winds." The abstractions and concrete details do not cohere to build up images to evoke genuine emotion. One is induced to feel a passion that is not successfully evoked by the specific moment and occasion in the poem. The result of such passages is hazy and nebulous.

However, though da Costa does not pay much attention to particulars, he constantly affirms his belief in their historical validity. To him, it is not so much the concrete instance, place, or thing which matters, as much as the universal truth which each brings out or embodies. The individual is important only insofar as he manifests that which is essential to his class or society. Place and time are, from his point of view, only incidental to the archetypal struggles and triumphs of man. The poet's vision thus transcends the limitation of time and space. This, da Costa exalts, in what is perhaps the crescendo of his declamation:

I see man standing up to the challenge of centuries,
 head flung skyward, proud, pushing darkness
 back with the fire of a single candle;
 I see man naked and unshivering in the four winds,
 defiant and arrogant in the clamoring blast,
 warm with the fire of his single candle;
 In him I see a multitude of long accumulations and
 great prophecies hastening to fulfillment;
 In him, the sinews of a billion years and divine
 energies poured into the rearing of edifices not
 built of stone and steel and not without words
 alone;

In him, illimitable horizons extending beyond and on. [XII, p. 34]

Da Costa's vision has man as its ultimate center. Man is strong, enduring, pure energy. Man's defiance of nature is suggested by his determination to confront it with only his built-in weapons: imagination, intelligence, will. Note the suggestion of force and pressure through the use of hard-sounding words — *push, proud, darkness, arrogant, clamoring blast; billion years; divine energies*. Man's endurance and triumph over seemingly insurmountable difficulties are an accomplished fact, for he burns with Promethean fire and god-like power. There is a soaring quality to these lines, crowded with chant-like enumerations of words crowding one another and spilling over, and disappearing into the vague outlines of his stanza. Again, he slips into his mannerism of using general words — *multitude of long accumulations and great prophecies hastening to fulfillment*. Such high-sounding words merely bog down the movement of the poem rather than bring it to some new insight or mood. Even when he is on the verge of summoning a concrete image, such as "head flung skyward," "clamoring blast," "sinews," or "stone and steel," da Costa remains impalpable. His glimpses into flesh-and-blood-reality are inevitably absorbed into that all-encompassing apocalyptic vision which consumed his efforts as a writer.

It is evident in these lines that to da Costa, the mission of the poet, as of all artists, is to express not his personal beliefs or emotions or ideas, but to give form and utterance to the sentiments of his society, and, by that same token, to the sentiments of all men. They must inspire, elevate, direct man's attention beyond his unique problems and predicaments to the common problems and predicaments of all men:

Poets, philosophers, painters – musicians – artists
 all, your time is always and ever!
 Your place is wherever and everywhere!
 In you, advancement and regeneration!
 In you, the single fire of a single candle
 magnified into a nation!
 In you, precipitations of the individual into people,
 Strong as the molave! [XII, p. 35]

Da Costa does not delineate the means whereby the artist relates himself to his society and vice versa. But he clearly stresses the need for the poet, the philosopher, the painter, and the musician – indeed, all artists – to integrate with the masses. At this point of the poem, the image of the burning candle has dwindled. There is nothing new that the poet is saying nor anything surprising about the way he perceives the fusion of individual and national sensibilities through the poetic imagination. The rising singsong rhythm of the lines has no momentum other than the poet's hollow, impassioned statement of his social premise.

Da Costa's exaltation of the poet as the bard of the universe, rather than of a particular people in a given milieu, accounts to a great extent for the weakness of his poetry. He failed to regard the genesis of poetry in a concrete experience, inspired by an actual deeply felt personal experience or by a complex of historical events that trigger his emotional/intellectual response. Da Costa's unwavering faith in the ultimate triumph of human courage and endurance over despair and oppression, as delineated in the poem, is much too easily arrived at. It is a tenuous spirit of affirmation and optimism compared to that of his model, Walt Whitman. In Whitman's poems such as *Oneself I Sing* and *Song of Myself*, the belief in the ultimate harmony and unity of life is much more convincingly presented. It is traced through the drama of the self's search for its identity through its successive merging and separation from all things in the universe. And the poem is charged with the grandeur of all things in the cosmos, be it a single blade of grass, a man or a woman's body, a bustling street, a conglomeration of people, or a lonely dialogue with a star. Even the rhythm and images undulate with the self's arrival at its being. With Da Costa, there is a conspicuous lack of tension or intensity which characterizes good poetry. The poem announces the idea; it does not probe into it or render it luminous through its fusion of

images, rhythm, and symbols. Thus, while Whitman's poetry engages us in the poet's discovery of his self in all its varied, serious, comic, flippant, musing, and ironic poses, *Like the Molave* is greatly wanting in depth and dimension. Because he apparently did not imbibe the social life he attempted to depict, he could not really successfully assume the collective psyche. In his zeal to communicate his message, he sacrificed the pulse of Filipino life to the deadweight of his social premise.

One cannot, of course, ignore the fact that da Costa was severely handicapped by the language, while Whitman lived it. Although the generation to which he belonged had readily demonstrated its mastery of English for daily commerce and even for writing fiction, it was admittedly grappling with the language as a medium for poetry. Poetry is, after all, the form that requires the deepest awareness of language in order to harness its fullest resources for communicating feelings, attitudes, and values. Added to this basic difficulty was the newness of the free verse technique which da Costa must have learned through his reading of Whitman and other more modern American poets. The liberation from the conventional rules of versification and rhythm opened up possibilities for our writers. It also placed a greater burden on the individual writer to successfully fuse subject matter with form and technique.

The uncertainty of the writer who is still attempting to find this fusion can be discerned in *Like the Molave*. As we have seen, the content of the poem is an oversimplification. The language of the poem is an attempt to approximate the speech and rhythms of daily life. What makes it less than successful is the writer's tendency to substitute prose for poetry. In place of words rich with associations and connotations, he uses abstractions, trite phrases, or expressions as if to do so were to automatically rouse the reader's emotions. In lieu of the traditional form and syntax of words, he formulates his own: for example, *wastebasketed*, *circused*, *mahjongging*, *adventured*; *magnific utterance*; *pot-bellied softnesses* or *cloaked fastnesses*. Whether he uses this to mimic the native's clumsy use of English or to surprise the reader, the practice appears pretentious and clever.

One also notes da Costa's blatant fascination with the sounds of words rather than with their total sound-and-sense qualities. Listen to the following lines: "the masses are buffeted and baffled,"

[XIV, p. 37], the government is "the way out of the wilderness of withered institutions" [IX, p. 30], our native songs are "a kaleidoscope of tunes/rimmed by the pentagram of the Pacific" [VI, p. 24]. He was wont to twist and dislocate words out of their normal position for sheer rhetorical effect. For instance,

They also count, the masses, the poets,
philosopher artists in the nameless
way that is the people's. [XIV, p. 37]

This prose-sounding sentence is made to sound poetic simply through the arrangement of the elements of the sentence in such a way as to sound elevated. "They" at the beginning of the sentence refers to the artists enumerated after an intervening verb-adverb phrase. The words which end the sentence "that is the people's," could have been shortened to "of the people," but the choice was made for the purpose of making the sentence sound "elevated."

Or this:

What are dead heroes if from the wells of their lives we
draw not the water to slake our long thirst?
What, if from the springs of their spirit we drink not of faith
and the strength of our days?
Where are the living heroes? Who are they? [VIII, p. 28]

Notice the excessive use of inversion, parallelism, and repetition which only makes the poem sound pompous. It was not till the fifties that da Costa abandoned this old-fashioned declamatory style and tried his hand at the economical, spare, cryptic verse in the tradition of E.E. Cummings. In his poem "July Fourth, 1946: Not for the Books," he writes:

If Rizal and I myself are only
let be the pack O let be
the dogs; [I, p. 80, sic]

Here in the shadow of three flags
and a grandstand
sleep Rizal. [II, p. 81]

There is some attempt at specification and compression through the references and allusions and the structure is more compact.

In conclusion we can say that Zulueta da Costa was very much the product as well as the prophet of his age. His writing was a response to the clamor for poetry that would turn the attention of Filipinos away from distant landscapes to the more immediate

national realities. From our vantage point, the social consciousness of the thirties was shallow and naive. It is difficult to find in *Like the Molave* a mirror of that age. Furthermore, we have come to realize that social consciousness is not as simple as depicting Filipino scenes and customs, taking up the lot of the oppressed, and articulating a social message. A genuine poet will, by his responses to the world around him, inevitably express his age. But it was a start. In his fumbling experiments with language, form, and technique, da Costa anticipated the writers of future generations who would celebrate, less consciously perhaps, but more successfully, the Filipino experience.