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Taga sa Bato, by Antonio

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Lim teaches English at California State University, Long Beach. He says that *Tiger Orchids* is the first part of a projected trilogy. He is presently at work on the second novel in the series, *Sparrows Don't Sing in the Philippines*. *Tiger Orchids* is an auspicious beginning to the trilogy. It has vision, the underlying theme of Filipino as alien in a foreign country, now transmuted into the Filipino as critical *balikbayan*, returning to the land of dreams and memories. Lim writes with competence. His only defect is that his story is too telegraphic, more like a series of suggestive television images, than the full-blown and leisurely story that a traditional novel reader might look for. I cannot help but feel that the story should have been 300 pages and not just 94. The novella should have been (and could have been) a novel. But that is a criticism of technique, not of Lim's power as a writer.

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TAGA S A B A T O. By Teo T. Antonio. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1991. 157 pages.

Modern poetry in Filipino has had a substantial legacy from the past. Balagtas was the powerful presence from which no poet could escape, so pervasive was the influence he exerted upon generations of writers, especially those writing in the first half of the twentieth century. His was the voice to which the likes of Iñigo Ed. Regalado, Lope K. Santos, Julian Cruz Balmaseda, among others, responded with much enthusiasm. From the 1920s until the postwar years, the folk dimension of poetry was further highlighted with the emergence of the *balagtasan*, a poetic joust participated in by the most popular poets of the period, such as Jose Corazon de Jesus, Florentino Collantes, Amado V. Hernandez, Emilio Mar. Antonio.

In the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century, the reader discerns a taken-for-granted belief that poetry is necessarily shaped by politics, and that the poet is an individual whose work is invariably determined by the country's socio-historical processes. The writers' political commitment, shaped by Balagtas' own perceived engagement with history, has been variously exhibited even as they grappled with such issues as imperialism and colonialism and their effects on the nation's life.

It would take the efforts of Alejandro G. Abadilla, writing in the 1930s, to pave the way for the emergence of another type of poetry as he problematized what was perceived as the canonized view of the poet's function in society. With Abadilla as the pioneer, modernism came into poetry in Filipino, the effects of which would be most vividly manifested in the writings of the young poets of the 1960s. In Abadilla, modernism meant the celebration of the god-like self of the poet, the unceasing search for the authentic roots of being in a manner that shocked the more traditional poets. In Rio

Alma and company, on the other hand, modernism meant a rather uncritical acceptance of the tenets laid down by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and the New Critics on the ideal poetry and the ideal poet.

It is worthwhile to point out, however, that even in the most allusive poems of Rogelio Mangahas or Lamberto Antonio, the reader continues to detect a strong social note of protest directed against the establishment and the violence and injustice it has spawned. In other words, the modern poets in Filipino, despite the appearance of falling prey to the individualistic and narcissistic themes of Western poetry, never turned their backs on the poet's traditional role as a commentator/critic.

It was for this reason that when calls for relevant poetry were made in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the poets responded immediately and sought to use their poetry to expose and to demystify the conspiracy of forces at work in Philippine society. The legacy of Balagtas lived on, side by side with the modernist influence that compelled the poets to treat their works as multilayered texts fashioned carefully as artifacts.

It is against this context that Teo Antonio and his *Taga sa Bato* should be seen, for even a cursory look at his poetry immediately suggests how well the poet has positioned himself as a contemporary writer for whom the past is not merely a charming anachronism but a source of strength and life. To return to the past, to one's roots, is to discover not only the meaning of the past, but the significance of the present. It is through the dialectics between the past and present that the persona in Antonio's poems is able to make sense of much of life.

The book is divided into eight sections, each of which is framed by quotations from other poets—Benigno Ramos, Amado V. Hernandez, Marcelo H. del Pilar, Emilio Mar. Antonio, among others. Immediately, Antonio establishes the frame of reference of the various sections in this deliberate use of intertextuality, where other writers' texts function as roadmaps to help the reader understand the specific concerns of each group of poems. In another way, the choice of texts that serve as prologues acknowledges the poet's predilection toward literature that engages political realities.

Consequently, the reader invariably realizes that Antonio has affirmed, in no uncertain terms, the difficulty of abstracting literature from time and history, the poet from a certain historical consciousness. What is pointed out again and again, is the poet's immersion in time and his involvement in the socio-political processes. The concept of the free artist, in the romantic mould, is denied in this collection.

Whether describing a nipa hut (*bahay-kubo*), or the streets of Manila, or referring to predictable stories of blood and mayhem in the country's tabloids or meditating on the craft of writing, Antonio never loses his consciousness of himself as a writer whose role is to critique various forms of injustice. A case in point is his "Barong Tagalog" in which the persona objects to the practice of wearing the barong tagalog on Independence Day. That clothes do not a man make is the cliché on which the poem is based, but as structured by Antonio, the short poem is a devastating attack on society's hypocrisy and its refusal to go beyond what is seen on the surface of things.

The sardonic humor of Antonio is also revealed in a great number of poems in which the initial impression of jest gives way to a scathing indictment of irrelevant texts ("Ang Sabi ng Iba"), rising fares ("Tsuper at Pasahero"), skyrocketing prices ("Sabi sa Diyaryo"), and prostitution ("Ale, ale"). The manner is easy, no doubt facilitated by a sure and knowledgeable handling of images and the rhythm of everyday speech, but this in no way diminishes the value of the poems as short but effective exposés of society's many follies.

The imaginative use of art to frame and structure a whole society's experiences is discernible in all the sections, but the persona comes out most polemical in the third section, in which vignettes of a dying city are graphically portrayed. In the fifth and sixth sections, the same mode is exhibited as the different personae paint unforgettable portraits of characters confronting situations of violence that appear to have become institutionalized. The poem occasioned by the brutal murder of Rolando Olalia unequivocally demonstrates the merging of aesthetics and politics in Antonio's work:

Marahas ang lagda ng punglo't patalim
sa mukha't katawan. Waring may babala
ang mga salarin: Dapat na puksain,
sinumang mamuno ng laksang duhaging
kawal ng paggawa. Makipot na balon
ang isip ng mga nagpasyang kumitil.

In very precise images and in a tone that conveys the persona's answer, the poem "Hindi Mapupuksa ang Laksang Rolando" constructs a world where individuals with a cause are made victims of the state's terrifying forces.

What gives *Taga sa Bato* its unique power is not solely its avowed polemical purpose; it is easy to lull one's self into believing that his/her poems are not only actual representations of the world but effective means of changing the same world. This concept has been increasingly questioned and problematized. What makes Antonio's poems powerful lies in its unceasing, almost relentless argument with the past. More specifically, his poetry must be perceived as an individual's active response to the challenge that emanated from his father, another poet of note who belonged to the tradition of Balagtas.

When Teo Antonio was born, his father, Emilio Mar. Antonio, wrote "Supling" which, like most poems written upon the birth of a child, expresses a father's hope for his son's future:

Ikaw, sana, anak, ay maging dakila
Na ikararantal ng Inang nagpala;
Nawa'y lumaki kang bawat gintong nasa,
Maukol sa iyong tinubuang lupa.

In a poem written in 1984, "Pagdalaw sa Nayon Ko," Antonio refers to his father's poem and the role it has played in his life as a writer.

Puso ko at diwa'y bumulas na ngayon
At "taga sa bato" ang sumpang imuhon.
Ibinabalik ko ang tulang nag-usbong
Sa dibdib mo't diwang sa aki'y nag-ampon.

The poet must return to his birthplace and to his past, in an almost obsessive way, to rediscover its significance to the present. In the case of Antonio, the past functions as an agent of regeneration to vivify him in the endless struggle to help his readers make sense of a chaotic present. An important element in this past is the father whose presence pervades Antonio's writing. In fulfilling his father's wishes—through his poems that never lose touch with the need to weld art and politics—Antonio has shown that he is really the son of his father.

Taga sa Bato is a touching testimony of a son's struggle to make real a father's wish. The result is a collection of poems with intensity and passion as literary constructs that will be difficult to match in many years to come.

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