LIKE THE MOLAVE & COLLECTED POEMS
R. ZULUETA DA COSTA

INTRODUCTION BY SALVADOR P. LOPEZ
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By Salvador D. Lopez

CRITICS are generally agreed that modern American poetry started with Walt Whitman. Tracing the genealogy of the leading poets during the past fifty years, they point out how the thread of the Whitman tradition has run through every change of temper and fashion to our own day. Whitman led the more vital poetic revolt of two that shook American letters during the latter half of the nineteenth century, a revolt directed against the frigid intellectual classicism of the day and the stiff classical forms that were favored by the later Victorians and by their counterparts in America. On the other hand, the more spectacular Symbolist revolt, stemming from Baudelaire and Rimbaud, was essentially a revolt of escapism, marked by the half-scared, half-snobbish aloofness of the sensitive poet who looks upon the world with an averted glance or a squamish eye. The revolt led by Whitman derived in a sense from Wordsworth, and was essentially a revolt marked by challenge and affirmation on behalf of the common man and the soil whence come his nourishment and strength.

By a process of contagion that is by no means mysterious, these two revolutionary traditions in modern poetry had, as might have been expected, their repercussions in the Philippines. First came the Symbolist influence or its equivalent—belated, as most of the cultural influences upon the Philippines were belated, by reason of the natural lag in the transmission through a strange language of the artistic and intellectual values inherent in it. Poetry was regarded as strictly amoral, that is, without any context in reality or any purpose whatever, apart from the highly personal and private intuitions of the poet. From this sprang the ivory tower poetry of the twenties, in itself constituting a two-fold revolt against the poetry of the preceding period—a repudiation of the ubiquitous moral or sentimental tone of the latter, and a departure from the stiff verse forms that it favored. The result was a poetry more firmly moulded according to the poet's strictly individual affirmations of his inner life.
This school produced in the Philippines a Jose Garcia Villa who resembles, in his artistic predilections and in his career, the émigré American poets who fled their homeland in order to find in the freer atmosphere of Europe, especially in France, the hospitality, encouragement, and appreciation that they craved. The native scene, heavy with the musty odor of morality, and hostile to iconoclasts of every stripe, flattered neither their vanity nor their pride. Their reaction was not unexpected: a bitter disgust with the philistinism of those who condemned the uncommon frankness of their speech, and a superior disdain of the bourgeois mind that would not respond to the modern spirit of revolution that they were supposed to exemplify.

But this revolution was, and has always been anywhere, a fragile and ineffectual revolution at best. The great revolutionary changes in the arts have ever been directed against things of greater pith and moment than mere matters of form and technique or even of private morality. They have been directed against the condition of man in a given society, and the philosophy of life which sustains that condition. They have been harnessed, affirmatively, to great human and social ends.

This is the type of revolution that Whitman typified and that has persisted in American letters through three quarters of a century in the works of Edwin Markham, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Muriel Rukeyser. By the process of contagion already alluded to, it was inevitable that the area of this influence would eventually include the Philippines or any other country that may chance to hear, speak or write the American language. Even Villa, in mind and temperament poles apart from the Whitman tradition, could not resist the magnetic rhythms of "Leaves of Grass," any more than the introvert and morbid Robinson Jeffers could resist the large and resounding harmonies of the Whitman line. But Villa was never intellectually or emotionally equipped to receive and transmit the deep social passion and the expansive democratic vistas of Whitman, and it is not to him that we must turn for the full-bodied realization of the Whitman tradition in the Philippines. Villa comprehended no more than the outward shell of this tradition; he was completely ignorant of the living seed of social significance that lay within, and it has so far not struck any deep roots in his own poetry.

For a rich flowering of this tradition in the Philippines, we must turn to a poet of larger vision than he. In R. Zulueta da Costa we meet a legitimate inheritor of the best and sturdiest poetic tradition in American letters, and LIKE THE MOLAVE is an earnest of his intellectual affiliation and artistic communion.

In this long title poem of the collection, a Filipino poet speaks on a difficult subject—difficult for any artist in any medium—in a voice that rings true. For LIKE THE MOLAVE is essentially a patriotic poem—a glowing celebration of the national destiny, an eloquent statement of Filipinism. Few artists have tackled such a theme without succumbing to either of two temptations which are fatal to art: sentimentalities which, in the Filipino poet, is a congenital weakness; and declamation which becomes more blatant than oratorical still with every accession of the patriotic fire. With very few exceptions, all patriotic poems are of necessity third-rate, and this is because patriotism is one of the shallowest and most artificial of the human emotions, pandering to a group-feeling that is rarely sound and honest.

LIKE THE MOLAVE is one of these few exceptions, and it escapes this summary judgment only because it stands up as an indubitable work of art, as competent in execution as it is sound and honest in thought. The patriotic passion is banked with a fine restraint, and the affirmation of Filipinism is wisely balanced with the sharp satire of genuine self-knowledge. The poet never flatters his countrymen unadulteratedly; he tells them of the "marmoreal dream" of a great nation that must be carved on the "silent cliffs of freedom," but he asks them also whether they are ready to accomplish the task "today...this hour...this minute," or wait "tomorrow and tomorrow." We can be a nation.

Like the molave, firm, resilient, staunch,
Rising on the hillside, unafraid,
Strong in its own fibre;
or we can be

easy-going, parasitic, frivolous,
inconstant, indolent, inefficient—
a nation

. . . forever and forever
Lighting candles in the wind.

Our poet wields a broadsword in one hand, and a scalpel in the other—the broadsword against those who would speak ill and unjustly of our people, the scalpel to cut up the festering sores that afflict the nation. He celebrates and condemns, affirms and denies; he challenges the distortions of the hostile critics but makes criticisms truer and more penetrating of his own. He sees:

The youth of the land... an old man laughing through a perpetual infancy;
. . . a bastard child of a thousand dreams, masquerading and dancing;

he sees the citizen going to Quiapo church every Friday—

Give me a raise and I will offer a candle—

and another going to Antipolo every May—

. . . more profits for more candles;

and he overhears the banal vulgarities which pass for wit among the young people, and the vapid conversation of the elite.

He sees and hears all these and excuses nothing. But if he records them with a sharp and unforgiving eye, it is because he would look through them and beyond—

I see man standing up to the challenge of the centuries, head flung skyward, proud, pushing darkness back with the fire of a single candle . . .

In him I see a multitude of long accumulations and great prophecies hastening into fulfillment.

The poet has achieved that rare equipoise which is only to be found in artist minds of the highest order: perfect sanity within the inexplicable domain of genius.

But he probes deeper yet into the social cancer; he sees beneath the symptoms on the surface; he knows instinctively that there is more to the disease by which the nation is afflicted than meets the eye. He writes:

In the year before Christ there were whips.
In the year of our Lord there are also whips.
Other than leather—

and he asks:

The government builds for progress.
The capitalist builds for more capital . . .
What does the worker build for?

Elsewhere, he gives the answer obliquely and yet without that fine satirical touch which makes the nerves tingle with a pleasant sense of discovery:

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 reburial of the man in the fields
at his tomato and rice;
the fisherman hailing his net;
the teacher bent over lesson-plans;
the workers waist-deep in mud;
the miners choking in gold dust.

Here is poetry that is as large in its social sympathies as the sweep of its resonant lines is large; poetry that is exultant because it exalts the common man. Rarely has the Social Muse been courted in language of finer accent and more irresistible persuasion. And as if to complete and round off his extraordinary triumph, the magnificent tour de force by which he has married politics unto poetry, the poet digresses awhile in order to set forth his artistic creed:
Poets, philosophers, painters, musicians,—artists all,
Your place is wherever and everywhere!
In you, advancement and regeneration!
In you, the sacred fire of a single candle
Magnified into a nation!
In you, precipitations of the individual into people.

The magnitude of this achievement in Filipino poetry is not diminished by any criticism to the effect that it is no more than the adaptation to the local scene of a modern poetical fad, fashion or craze. To make this all-too-familiar charge is to repeat what the already discredited critics once said of modern art: that it is crude, sensational, and barbaric. The answer to this is that the crude, sensational, and barbaric Whitman, like his counterparts in painting—Matisse, Gaugin, and Van Gogh—stands today at the very peak of American achievement in poetry, and the calibre of that achievement is nothing to scoff at.

Every age, said Emerson, requires a new confession. Each generation speaks a language peculiar to itself, best suited to express its ideas and ideals, its hopes and frustrations, and moulded more cleanly for the newer and more manifold uses of man and society. The language of our age and generation is the language of inquiry and protest, of affirmation and challenge, and they must lack understanding who think that this is a mere fad, fashion or craze. Our speech is a more public speech, and the language of our poetry must approximate as closely as possible the speech of the common people, not so much in the manner as in the matter thereof, with only this difference: that it must of necessity retain the suggestive ambiguity and something of the sheer incantation of verse which characterize the poetry of every age and clime.

The charming romantic poetry of the feudal age, and the smug neo-romantic poetry of the capitalistic era are gone forever, along with the social systems of which they were the expression. A new poetry has arisen, expressing and growing out of the predicament of man in our time—of man earnestly seeking a way out of the terrible chaos in which he is involved, of man in protest against an unendurable order of things and trying desperately to fashion a new and happier world out of the ruins.

The poetry of Shakespeare, Pope or Keats, of Longfellow, Lanier or Poe can no more be written today than the times in which they lived can be restored in the England of Winston Churchill or the America of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Poetry has rightly been called one of the mainstays of the race, and it is not likely to be outmoded by the progress of that science which is supposed to be its implacable enemy. Man will outgrow poetry only if our poets remain aloof from the mainstream of human life, if they insist in speaking an occult language of their own, if they flee the raging battle around them on the excuse that art is their only business and the life of man is not. If poetry is to remain as the "ever newer and surer stay" of the race, our poets must speak to us in a language that we know and can understand; in a language, one might say, as modern as television and yet as eternal as light.

R. Zulueta da Costa speaks this language to us and for us in this book of poems. The language is not without flaws. It suffers in places from a rhetorical exuberance that the reader may justly ascribe to the prodigality of youth; the crashing harmonies of the long lines coming wave on wave break upon him with a plenitude of music that, thrilling at first, soon becomes somewhat tedious. On the other hand, where he uses the standard verse forms, he is often compelled by his fastidious regard for the rules of metre to use awkward inversions and ellipses with such results as:

- Above the heaving grass, the spirit wears
- Its weeping unto prayer; body bears,
- Intoned, continuing whisper, God-begun;

- and this:

- They will forsake
- Your shrine; when ended is grief-holiday,
- Pray'r will, with flags, be neatly tucked away.
The opening lines of *Like the Molave* are pretty nearly spoiled by the stilted apostrophe to the "spirits of the martyred brave," and the use of repetition soon becomes a mannerism that no longer fools the accustomed ear. But the flaws of language are few and far between, and they detract but little from the excellence of the performance as a whole. For this excellence is not merely technical; it is the excellence of substance, of something thought out, argued, and laid bare—the excellence of

*You in whose hands is government,*
*We charge you with the people:*
*Are your hands holy for the sacred trust?*
*Blaze fiercely, government; you are the way*
*Out of the wilderness of withered institutions.*
LIKE THE MOLAVE

I

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.
Our shoulders are not strong; our sinews are
Grown flaccid with dependence, smug with ease
Under another’s wing. Rest not in peace;
Not yet, Rizal, not yet. The land has need
Of young blood—and, what younger than your own,
Forever spilled in the great name of freedom,
Forever oblate on the altar of
The free? Not you alone, Rizal. O souls
And spirits of the martyred brave, arise!
Arise and scour the land! Shed once again
Your willing blood! Infuse the vibrant red
Into our thin anaemic veins; until
We pick up your Promethean tools and, strong,
Out of the depthless matrix of your faith
In us, and on the silent cliffs of freedom,
We carve for all time your marmoreal dream!
Until our people, seeing, are become
Like the molave, firm, resilient, staunch,
Rising on the hillside, unafraid,
Strong in its own fibre; yes, like the molave!
The youth of the land is a proud and noble appellation,
The youth of the land is a panoramic poem,
The youth of the land is a book of paradoxes,
The youth of the land is a pat on one's back,
The youth of the land is a huge canvas of spectral colors,
The youth of the land is an epic tragedy-comedy,
The youth of the land is a crashing symphony,
The youth of the land is a child grown old in tears,
The youth of the land is an old man laughing through a perpetual infancy;
A bastard child of a thousand dreams, masquerading and dancing,
The youth of the land.

II

Twenty thousand young men march
flags unfurled heads lifted high!
One two three four!
Twenty thousand young men halt
at the martyr's monument.
Ha-ah! one two!

II

Silence and the President begins: My fellow countrymen.

The youth of the land listens, shifts uneasily, nudges his fellow youth of the land: Say look at that dame, some number, not bad at all.

The youth of the land listens: Christ, I hope he cuts the blahblah short, I'm getting fed up; say, some legs; hell, it looks like rain!

The youth of the land listens, stands erect, nudges his fellow youth of the land: Say, that sonoofabitching corporal's got his eye on us, one more demerit and I'm done for.
The youth of the land listens.

The President ends: We shall fulfill their dream. Applause.

Twenty thousand young men march
One two three four!
Compançe dismissed!
Hell, that's over; Christ, some dame!
We, the Filipinos of today, are soft, easy-going, parasitic, frivolous, inconstant, indolent, inefficient.

Would you have me sugarcoat you?

I would be happier to shower praise upon my countrymen . . . but let us be realists . . . let us strip ourselves . . .

Youth of the land you are a bitter pill to swallow.

This is a testament of youth borne on the four pacific winds; This is a parable of seed four ways sown in stone; This is a chip not only on the President's shoulder: The nation of our fathers shivers with longing expectation.

Shall we, sons and daughters, brother youths of the land, Walk up now and forever knock the flirting chip off? Or will the nation of our fathers be forever and forever Lighting candles in the wind?

The answer is tomorrow and tomorrow. We shall give up our lives, tomorrow. Today? this hour? this minute? We are secure under the Stars-and-Stripes.

I went to a movie today gosh I cried. I went to a movie yesterday gee I laughed. I bought my laughter and my tears.

My horse gave dividendazo yesterday. My new dress is the latest note. My parents gave me the best of education.

I speak English and Spanish and French. I speak foreign languages without accent. I can lisp a little Tagalog.

I think the conga is divine don't you? I think Szostakowics is brilliant don't you? We Manilans are really cosmopolitan.

Was not Franco the word divine made incarnate? Were not those leftist Reds atrocious? Federico García Lorca? Never heard of him.

Punctually we remember our dead once a year. Punctually we worship God on Sunday morning. We are the only Christian nation in the Orient.
I donated a new organ to my parish.
I made a novena to Saint Anthony.
I give regularly to our missions.

Our missions cleared the jungle dark.
Our missions hoisted God upon the mountain-top.
Our Igorot child says give me money.

At the outskirts of the town the schoolhouse inspires.
The children inspire. Philippines my Philippines.
When Washington was a boy his father gave him a hatchet.
We must not tell lies. We have no money for education.

VI

My American friend says:
show me one great Filipino speech to make your people
listen through the centuries;
show me one great Filipino song rich with the soul of your
seven thousand isles;
show me one great Filipino dream, forever sword and
shield—
speech eloquent and simple as our Of the People by the
People for the People;
song grand, everlasting as our My Country 'Tis of Thee;
dream age-enduring, sacred as our American democracy!

Friend, our silences are long but we also have our speeches.
Father, with my whole heart I forgive all.
Believe me, your reverence.

Speeches short before the firing squad, and yet of love.

I want our people to grow and be like the molave.
A new edifice shall arise, not out of the ashes
Of the past, but out of the standing materials
Of the present.

Speeches short, blooming with hope on the threshold of the sun.

I want to be a plain Juan de la Cruz.

Speeches short, of a man remembering a man long and long.

Friend, our songs are legion but all songs are one.
Land of the Morning is but one;
the others are a kaleidoscope of tunes
rimmed by the pentagram of the Pacific—
of Luzon, of Visayas, of Mindanao—
songs lush with brown earth
and the tides of tears and laughter;
and all songs are one.

Friend, our dreams are rooted in the earth,
but all our dreams are wings;
rising in the first sweep of sunrise
tumultuously above the hills,
in the sinking wake of sundown
swift along the curve of shore,
from the hollows of dark silence
soaring up the astral solitudes;
and all wings are dreams,
and all dreams are peace.

VII

My American friend continues:
you are a nation being played for a sucker;
you are susceptible to lachrymal inducement:
a man comes to you with a sob tale and soon
you are a poorfish swallowing hook-line-and-sinker.

And I answer with parable of analogy:
one adventured into port and called us brothers;
we fed him with the milk and honey of the land;
he filled his pockets by the sweat of the little brown
brother and packed for home,
taking with him but one song for souvenir:
O the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga.

The lady visitor wishes to study Filipino culture and life:
our museums are open, our history rich with generations;
under her nose at every turn the vital life of a child-nation
beating its hopeful beat with eager avian pulse,
giving her tokens: a mestiza dress, a bamboo flute, a song.
She gives something in return: she pays an urchin to
undress and pose climbing a coconut tree for the folks
back home.

Over and over returning parable.

Friend, are these the ways of the West?

Friend, this is not the American Way.
The little brown brother opens his eyes to the glorious sound of
the Star Spangled;
dreams to the grand tune of the American dream;
is proud to be part of the sweeping American magnitude;
strains his neck upon the rising skyscraper of American
ideals, and on it hinges faith, hope, aspiration;
sings the American epic of souls conceived in liberty;
quivers with longing brotherhood of men created equal;
envisions great visions of the land across the sea where
dwell his strong brothers.

And then the fact. The crushing fact of a world no longer
shining through the exalted word;
the world where the deed is, the intolerable deed.

Across the sea the little brown brother is no longer a creature
terrorized by hatred, shamed by contempt and the sting of
prejudice:
he is a child fondling the smashed remains of a toy given
by mother and by mother shattered;
he is a child wondering, questioning, are these the ways of
a mother?
he is a child perplexed and hurt, yet fondling the ghost of
a toy;
hoping and hoping mother will mend the toy.

The repatriate returns sullen and broken: he is that child. We
know the story, the black looks, the scowls, the placard
in the restaurants saying: Neither Dogs nor Filipino

Allowed; the warning at the fair: Beware of Filipino
Pickpockets; the loneliness, the woman denied.

Yet what say you, repatriate? America is a great land.
Dear child, hoping and hoping mother will mend the toy.

The emigrant thinks: surely if we welcome the big white bro-
ther blasting the gold out of our hills, surely, the little
brown brother will not be grudged the picking of lettuce
leaves from his fields.
Dear child, hoping and hoping.

The Shanghai refugee arrives: this is the new home.
The Jewish refugee arrives: this is the new home.
The Hongkong refugee arrives: this is the new home.

Philippines, you are not a sucker.
Philippines, you are the molave child, questioning,
    wondering, perplexed, hurt;
the molave child hoping and hoping mother will mend
the shattered toy.
XVII

Let the words fly and boom and crash.
Let the centuries spin and calculate.

The mathematical certainty endures:
Philippines minus (Spain plus America) equals MOLAVE

Who will decipher the Philippine hieroglyph?
Who, unravel the intricate formula?

Who, enter the jungle, mount the steep,
And find molave proud, knowing no death?

XVIII

They say the molave is extinct
But they are blind or will not see.

Stand on the span of any river, and lo!
Relentlessly to and fro, cross and recross, molave!

Yes, molave strikes roads into the darkest core!
Yes, molave builds seven thousand bridges in blood!

Bagumbayan planted the final seed.
Balintawak nurtured the primal green.

Molave, uprooted and choked, will not succumb.
Molave presses on and will not be detained.

Let Spain speak.
Let America speak.
XIX

Not yet, Rizal, not yet.
The glory hour will come.
Out of the silent dreaming,
From the seven-thousandfold silence,
We shall emerge, saying: WE ARE FILIPINOS,
And no longer be ashamed.

Sleep not in peace.
The dream is not yet fully carved.
Hard the wood, but harder the blows.
Yet the molave will stand.
Yet the molave monument will rise.
Gods walk on brown legs.