

3-31-1953

## Like the Molave and Collected Poems, Effigies: Thirty-Seven Poems and Furrows and Arrows

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### Recommended Citation

Bernad, Miguel A. (1953) "Like the Molave and Collected Poems, Effigies: Thirty-Seven Poems and Furrows and Arrows," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.3550>  
Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol1/iss1/9>

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# philippine studies

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**Like the Molave and Collected Poems by R. Zulueta da Costa; Effigies: Thirty-Seven Poems by Ramón Echevarria; and Furrows and Arrows: Poetry and Verse by Jorge Bocobo**

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 1, no. 1 (1953): 79–87

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and I think, *salvo meliore judicio*, that the final commentary on the Gospels cannot be written until China, Japan and India have been Christianized. (p. 51)

The temptation must be resisted, in a brief review, to dwell on the possibility of a future Christian culture in Asia and the part in that culture which, in God's providence, it may be the vocation of the Philippines to play. The Holy Fathers have consistently spoken of our country as a bridge to the vast and ancient East, have always held that our unique historical position as a Christian nation in Asia implies a vocation to the missionary apostolate. Viewed in the perspective of an Oriental Christian culture of the future this missionary vocation takes on added and challenging significance. Perhaps I should confess to a rather immoderate enthusiasm for this book and express the hope that it may be widely and attentively read by—especially—our college and university students. It would increase in them the "awareness...that the missionary apostolate is not a specialty, but an integral part of a full Christian life, a primary concern of the whole Church, the laity as well as the priests and religious." (Author's preface, p. vii) And it would challenge them to contribute each in his measure to tracing on the canvas of Asia the features of the Eastern Face of Christ.

C. G. Arévalo

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LIKE THE MOLAVE AND COLLECTED POEMS. By R. Zulueta da Costa.  
Introduction by Salvador P. Lopez. Manila. 1952. pp. 90.

EFFIGIES: THIRTY-SEVEN POEMS. By Ramón Echevarria. Manila.  
1952. pp. 44.

FURROWS AND ARROWS: POETRY AND VERSE. By Jorge Bocobo.  
Manila. 1951. pp. xiii-186.

It might be argued, with some cogency, that English is not a foreign language in the Philippines. Though not autochthonous, it might be said to have become acclimatized. The first two volumes of the three under review might be cited as proof; and, to complete the picture, we might also cite the *Prose and Poems* of Nick Joaquin, which will be reviewed later in this magazine. The third volume now under review belongs in another class entirely, and may perhaps be symptomatic.

1

Mr. Zulueta da Costa's is an elegantly printed book, handsomely bound—quite different from the ordinary run of locally made books.

It is a tribute to the fast-growing book publishing trade in the Philippines. I refer, of course, to the de luxe edition limited to one hundred and fifty-one copies. (The book may be obtained in cheaper binding.)

Nor is the charm limited to the exterior. There are passages of genuine poetic fancy, like the lines on the late Alexander Lippay, conductor of the Manila Symphony Orchestra:

Mourn not for him; he was not poor whose hand  
Reached out for stars and showered them to earth.

But it is to "Like the Molave," which forms the principal portion of this volume that I wish to direct attention: for it is Mr. Zulueta's chief work, for which he received first prize in a literary contest sponsored by the Philippine Government in 1940. It is a much reviewed and much praised work. Now, after thirteen years, it is perhaps time to reassess it, with the experience of war to afford us perspective.

In the well-written introduction to the present volume, Mr. Salvador P. Lopez says much about the poem but nothing about its genesis: a regrettable omission, for the poem is hardly intelligible unless viewed against its historical background. The poem seems to be a commentary on and a dramatization of, an address delivered by President Manuel L. Quezon on August 19, 1938, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, to the students of the various universities and schools of Manila assembled in the Rizal Memorial Field. The President's theme was the apparent degeneration of the Filipino national character and the "softness" of modern Filipino youth. It is amusing to recall that while the President was expatiating with great vigor on the "softness" of youth, a heavy downpour of rain suddenly came, causing that same youth to scatter for shelter. The famous Quezon temper at once flared up: "Are you made of paper?" he cried to his fleeing audience.

But to return to the address, what Mr. Quezon said on that occasion is worth quoting as a background to the "Molave" poem:

We, the Filipinos of today, are soft and easy-going. Our tendency is toward parasitism. We are uninclined to sustained strenuous effort. We lack earnestness. Face-saving is the dominant note...of our existence. Our norm of conduct is...expediency rather than...principles...We are frivolous in our view of life...We take our religion lightly. We think that lip-service and profession are equivalent to deep and abiding faith. We are inconstant. We lack perseverance; the first difficulties baffle us, and we easily admit defeat...

Our ancestors were not thus, said Mr. Quezon. "They were strong-willed, earnest, adventurous, and daring people...They had the courage to be pioneers...But those traditions are either lost or forgotten..." He mentioned Rizal, Mabini, del Pilar, Luna, and

"many others, giants' all, who lived in those days and gave luster to our name. They are dead, and it seems that their...virtues are buried with them." The President then went on to enumerate other national failings: lack of self-restraint or of self-discipline; dependence upon others and upon the government; loss of social decorum from a mistaken notion of modernity, mistaking insolence for good-breeding; etc. "Let us be realists," he added. "Let us cast away pretense and futile pride. Let us look at ourselves stripped of the veil...with which in our vanity we often cover ourselves."

It was in such a context that Quezon gave utterance to a memorable sentence—not original (for the figure was old) but memorable:

I want our people to grow and be like the molave, strong and resilient, rising on the hillside, unafraid of the raging flood, the lightning or the storm, confident of its own strength.

Mr. Zulueta has prefixed this sentence as epigraph to his poem. The close connection, incidentally, between the address and the poem may account for the didacticism and the rhetorical tone that occasionally intrude themselves into the latter.

The poem is in nineteen sections, the first an apostrophe to Rizal and the national heroes:

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 .....

..... 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 our people, seeing, are become  
 Like the molave, firm, resilient, staunch,  
 Rising on the hillside, unafraid.

Resounding rhythm indeed, not often heard in Philippine verse.

Mr. Quezon's indictment against the youth of the land—its softness and frivolity—are dramatized in sections III, IV and V. The frivolity and superficiality of Manila's "cosmopolitan" youth, are effectively portrayed:

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 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 Szostakowicz is brilliant don't you?  
 We Manilans are really cosmopolitan.

Was not Franco the word divine made incarnate?  
 Were not those Leftist reds atrocious?  
 .....

But superficiality is not limited to Manila. It is widespread in the provinces, through a superficial system of education. Or am I wrong in catching a note of sarcasm in the following lines?

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.

Religious smugness and superficiality (hinted at by President Quezon) are likewise dramatized:

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 St. Anthony.  
 .....

In Antipolo every May there is also great  
 praying before the dancing and lovemaking.  
 Holy Mother, make him dance with me.  
 Holy Mother, a yearly pilgrimage I promise if only.  
 .....

Perhaps the poet might be censured for not seeming to distinguish chaff from wheat. Surely, there must be some difference between praying for trivial things and praying for a good husband:

Holy Mother, a good husband.

Surely *that* is important—at least to the girl! And surely, there is nothing particularly flippant or frivolous about interest in the missions—mentioned in the same breath as interest in the conga!

From the frivolity of youth, the poet turns attention to the neglect of the masses:

They also count, the masses:  
buffeted and baffled, steady in routine,  
wing-clipped somewhere in flight...

The indifference shown by the general public to "poets, philosophers, painters, musicians," excites the poet's sympathy:

Brother poets, what is your lay?  
I know the story well, the twofold struggle  
with riches of soul and hunger of body,—  
yet you sing.

One of the better passages (despite the affectation in the thrice repeated "found") is a brief act of faith in the supremacy of ideas and the power of those who deal in ideas:

They also count, these poets, philosophers,  
artists in the nameless way that is the  
people's: little drops? Somehow, I think,  
the ocean; and in the swollen waters of  
the people's faith, found, found, found.

Regarding Mr. Zulueta's technique, Mr. Lopez has indicated the influence of Walt Whitman. One might add that there is an interesting hint of symbolism in section XV ("Give us wings"). The handling of allusions, though on a modest scale, suggests the earlier T. S. Eliot.

The praise heaped upon this poem since its publication in 1940 has been so general, and so generous, that it would be ungracious to dissent. Still, responsible criticism demands that defects be pointed out—and there are important defects here. The first is a certain childishness, a distressing trait. For instance:

My countrymen the day approaches.  
For the pocketless, the darkglasses of \$ and P.

Or the following passage intended to dramatize the frivolity of youth:

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-alt! one two!

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: . . . I hope he cuts the blahblah shotr, I'm getting fed up; say, some legs; hell, it looks like rain!

Interesting, but really trivial. There must be some more conclusive proof of youth's frivolity!

A second defect: it is open to question whether the poem is a poem at all in certain sections. For example, what is to be said of the *stichomuthia* in section II:

The youth of the land is a proud 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.

and so forth? Or, what is to be said of this anecdote which is the whole of section X?

"Guilty!" said the judge, adjusting his glasses,  
 to the man who had helped himself to an ounce of gold  
 And, taking them off, he smiled an appeasing  
 "good morning" to the man who had pocketed tons of it.

Similar to this defect is the rhetorical tone already noted. For example:

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;  
 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;

and so on. That is rhetoric, not poetry.

Besides these defects in technique, there are blemishes in the "message" itself (for this poem states a message even to the point of didacticism). First, the poem (at least in sections) is definitely "dated" —and it is of the essence of literature that it must be "not of an age but of all time". The anti-American (and anti-foreign) feeling manifested in sections VI, VII, IX, and elsewhere, belongs to a bygone era which ended with Pearl Harbor. Likewise, the defiant, half-resentful nationalism that seems to suggest an inferiority complex (sections XVII, XVIII, XIX) will find little sympathy among educated Filipinos of today. Filipinos today (after

Bataan) need not feel inferior. We can quietly take our place among the nations—without shame, but also without arrogance.

The same may be said of the indictment that Filipino youth is soft, frivolous, parasitical, unheroic, etc. Much of the indictment is true—in 1953 as in 1938. But the implication that the spirit of “the martyred brave” is dead, that “their virtues are buried with them”, that heroism is a thing of the past, can only amuse us. Four years after the Quezon address and two years after “Like the Molave”, Filipinos, young and old, showed to the world how “soft” they were in Bataan, Corregidor, O’Donnell, Fort Santiago, and the guerrilla-held mountains.

A further defect is the seeming naivete with which the poet appears to believe that the Philippines need only be shorn of Western influences to become an ideal land:

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

Maybe so. But the Philippines, minus the civilization of the West, would be a non-Christian Philippines—and it was a Christian people, upheld by Christian ideals, that fought in Bataan, languished in Fort Santiago, or hoped against hope in Occupied Manila while, as Chesterton says, “no help came at all”.

Two virtues of the poem (besides those already mentioned) might be noted. One is its brevity: paradoxically, since the poem is nineteen sections long. But the sections are short and to the point. To be sure, the sections are somewhat loosely strung together, lacking the organic unity of a five-movement Eliot “Quartet”; nevertheless (and this is the other virtue), the sections give a logical framework to the whole. The division of a poem into sections may very well be the standard pattern for a long poem for many years to come.

## 2

Mr. Echevarria is football coach at La Salle—and a competent one, as many an NCAA team has reason to know. He is also a cultured man of letters, of which fact this volume is witness. Football and poetry do not ordinarily go together; but it is the glory of the type of liberal education given in certain colleges in the Philippines (but, alas, too few) that their graduates are persons of wide interests and varied skills.

Some of the verses in the volume under review show a good ear, a feeling for words, and a certain degree of poetic insight. Human sympathy, linguistic ease, and a genuinely Catholic outlook, combine to give charm to “The Priest”:

A stooped, old man with hands that shake and falter  
 And lips aquaver, tremulous he stands  
 And over bread and wine upon the altar  
 Lifts thin, inaccurate hands.  
 About the book his feeble fingers fumble.  
 His eyes contract. He squints into the page  
 And supplicates the Lord with voice amumble  
 And dissonant with age.  
 A hush. He bows his head. His voice grown firmer;  
 His lips articulate each sacred word  
 And lo! make Christ incarnate with a murmur;  
 His hands lift up the Lord!

The "metaphysical" technique is handled with competence in "The Ascetic":

He tasted worldly wine but found it sour,  
 And drinks of hope instead. His life  
 Is sharp, metallic as a knife  
 Kept luminous with sacrifice.  
 Lurk in the misty dungeons of his mind  
 Strict calipers with hands of ice:  
 There wisdom is no more than wise  
 And flower no more than flower;  
 There nothing whispers, nothing sighs,  
 Save what he has most punctually designed  
 For some triumphal and unworldly hour.

Not every poem in this collection is as good as that, and even in the few choice ones, not everything is gold. There is a tendency to abstractness:

Hurl his songs from the pits of yearning  
 To the peaks of thought:  
 They shall hang from the crags of learning  
 Scintillant with sense unsought,  
 Amorphously burning.

Some poems are derivative, at least in idea. For instance, "The Child"—

He is God's prince of joy, who can behold  
 The earth, forever born anew,  
 Our fallen world has not yet marred his dreams,  
 Nor wisdom yet his mirth confined:  
 Still gleams here heaven's laughter, gleams  
 Within this lovely magic mind.

—which contains ideas expressed better in Wordsworth's great Ode and in Vaughn's "The Retreat". Finally, in one poem, one finds such epithets as: "this cataleptic stillness"; "The groping calculus of mortar-fire"; "fugues of hesitation"; "narcotic of obedience"—and one wonders what they mean.

Of the volume as a whole, therefore, one might say: There is perhaps not much achievement yet, but there is promise. Mr. Echevarria is a poet, and should be heard from again.

## 3

The third book (*Furrows and Arrows*) is written by a government official who apparently also has an interest in verse. Philippine letters could not be said to have been enriched by the publication of the present volume.

The book is divided into two parts, of which one part, we are told, contains "poems", and the other "verse". Of the "poems" the Foreword says: "The poems in the first part of this book are like *furrows* in which seeds of noble life have been sown. May the reader reap an abundant harvest of deep thought and high sentiment." Sample seed:

## THE BARRIO SCHOOL BOY

You see I am a little boy,  
 I go to our dear barrio school.  
 Reading, counting I most enjoy,  
 Planting, and fishing in the pool.  
 Every morning I wash my face,  
 Brush my teeth and my lessons read.  
 My drawing I carefully trace  
 And with rice the chickens feed.  
 After school to the field I go  
 The patient carabao to tend.  
 Seeing it slowly walk to and fro  
 Then to the house our way to wend.

"In the second part," the Foreword continues, "I have written light verse. I have thus shot *arrows* at human folly, but in all charity and festive humor". Sample of festive humor:

If unfortunately you have no cash  
 Society's high gates you cannot crash,  
 Whatever your worth, mental or moral,  
 On the big social pond you cannot splash!  
 If unfortunately you have no cash  
 You will eat hash, though you sport a mustache

*Mediocribus esse poetis non homines, non di, non concessere columnae.* Enough said!

MIGUEL A. BERNAD