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A Festive Lightness of Being

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Tiger Orchids on Mount Mayon, by Lim

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TIGER ORCHIDS ON MOUNT MAYON. By Paulino Lim, Jr.
Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1990. 91 pages

The editor's summary of this novella quotes a passage from an earlier short story ("Homecoming") by Paulino Lim: "Something must have pierced his mind and transfixed his vision, something . . . he had forgotten after a decade of absence. . . . I hope that it will free him from nostalgia and bring him closer to the reality of his homeland. . . . that is the only way he can come home again." The quote is a perceptive summary of *Tiger Orchids on Mount Mayon*.

The point of view in the novella is clearly that of a Filipino who has lived abroad for some time and who returns to the Philippines only to discover the gap between sentimental memories, romanticized by distance and time, and the harsh reality of contemporary Philippines. The resulting portrait is as ambiguous as the political reality of the Philippines itself and the human tensions, among which and from which, the novella takes shape. Lim quotes Heidegger: "The conflict is not a rift as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other." The orchid hunter still searches for the tiger orchids on Mount Mayon, even as the volcano erupts beneath his feet. "Beneath the slab of congealed lava jutting from the precipice, he saw the orchid with its yellow blossoms streaked with brown, swaying in calligraphic grace (p. 91)."

Is the Philippines a Garden of Eden where orchids bloom, or is it a volcano about to erupt? Is the orchid *cymbidium* or tiger orchid? Is the Philippines only *phaelenopsis amabilis* which blooms for just six or seven minutes before it dies? Lim draws no conclusions. He merely chronicles the ambiguity, perhaps with nostalgia, or more likely it seems, with frustration and a touch of bitterness. Ironically, James and Marjorie, Americans though they are, choose to remain in Bicol. Does the author choose to remain in the Philippines as genuine *balikbayan*, or does he return to California? What judgement does he make on the land of his birth?

The plot of the novella is the classic love triangle: American James Collins who manages a coconut oil-processing company in Legaspi, is having an affair with Zenaida, his Filipina secretary. His wife, Marjorie, has the prospect of a tenure track teaching position at Fresno State in California. For five years since her marriage to James, she has been teaching at Aquinas University, but now she must decide whether to remain in the Philippines with her husband or divorce him and return to California.

A subplot tells the story of Mark Ledesma, Lim's assistant, a University of the Philippines activist in the days of Martial Law, who is being pressured by the communists to take a more active role in the revolution. A third plot traces the story of Fr. Pelagio, the parish priest, who, as Lim says: "confronts social ills with the dilemma of pacifism and liberation theology." And, one might add, with processions and folk ritual. "Don't forget to toll the requiem bell this afternoon," he tells the sacristan in the final chapter. But who or

what is dead? Is it James' affair with Zenaida, or his marriage to Marjorie, the revolution or the relevance of the Church in contemporary Philippine society?

The three plots mirror the three social institutions in the Philippines—marriage and the family, politics and government, and the Church—and reflect the ambivalence and ambiguity of each in the nation. The three parts of the novella—Quake, Rift and Flood—record the deterioration of marriage into concubinage, civil government into graft and corruption, the Church into superstition. Or is it the other way around?

Is the tiger orchid worth pursuing or should it be abandoned for tenure in California?

The plot is also a scaffold on which Lim can erect a structure of social criticism. Although the characters articulate the comments, it is clear that the *balikbayan* author is the real critic of his own country. Mark's involvement with the leftists enables Lim to express the party line on graft and corruption in the government, the unequal distribution of wealth, the presence of the military on street corners and sand bags around the Municipal Building as symbols of government repression. There are also allusions to the presence of the American Bases, the national language, the corruption in the business world, and even Philippine traffic as a symbol of political and/ or cultural ethos. "Intimidation, not right of way, was the traffic rule in this part of the world." (p. 53)

But Lim's criticism is aimed at the Church as well as at government and politics. His characters talk of the Church's position on birth control, priestly celibacy, priests involved in politics, liberation theology and the folk attitudes towards the sacraments, processions as an answer to social reality, divorce and concubinage. One of the characters takes his Spanish *mestiza* mistress to parties. "She's the smartest looking. The Chinese gal cooks, the Japanese massages him, the Filipina gives him sex. Some harem . . ." (p. 57). Lim sees all of the serpents in the Garden of Eden that is the Philippines. He looks for worms under every stone.

One might look at the novella from another perspective. It is a story of broken dreams and shattered commitments—James and Marjorie in their marriage, Mark and the Party, Fr. Pelagio and the Church. Or it might also be considered a story of moral choices. The American couple must decide what to do about their marriage, to stay in the Philippines or return home to California. Mark must decide whether or not to return to the violence of revolution. Fr. Pelagio must discern the true nature and role of Church and priesthood. The individual commitments and moral choices are the reflection and constituents of national commitment and choices as well.

Father Pelagio walked past the cemetery to the edge of town and saw a water buffalo grazing in an uncultivated field next to a rice paddy. . . . In the distance behind the buffalo he saw a hut between an avocado and a coconut tree. A house of grass on bamboo stilts. How quickly would its thatched roof and siding go up in smoke if a flame touched it. (p. 50)

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 SABATO. 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