Notes on Gemino Abad’s “Rereading Past Writ: An Introduction”

- The course of Filipino poetry in English from 1905 to the present, according to Abad, may be characterized by 3 overlapping phases or dominant strains:
  - PERIOD OF APPRENTICESHIP OR IMITATION: an invertebrate Romantic spirit from our first published literary attempts in 1905-1940s
  - PERIOD OF GROWTH & EXPERIMENTATION: an enduring formalist or “New Critical” concern from the ‘50s to the ’70s
  - PERIOD OF MATURITY OR THE MODERN PERIOD: an open, liberative or post-structuralist space from the ‘70s to the present

- From *The Filipino Student’s Magazine* (1905) to Jose Garcia Villa’s *Have Come, Am Here*, the creative struggle was with both the new language, English, and the poet’s subject, i.e., the native or Filipino matter that is to be expressed in that language.

- What “native or Filipino matter,” what *humanity as Filipino*, is simply inexpressible, but precisely that is the occupation of poetry, its depth and compass, what American poet Wallace Stevens calls “musing the obscure”

- For the poet, the language comes alive, be it English or Tagalog, not from the word that are already there and their meanings in daily usage, but from their tillage or furrows, the particular uses to which they are put by which our senses of our own reality is achieved.

- Fernando M. Maramag (fugitive emphasis on our “scene so fair”)--- FIRST IMPORTANT POET IN ENGLISH

- In our FIRST ANTHOLOGY OF “FILIPINO-ENGLISH” VERSE, Rodolfo Dato’s Filipino poetry (1924), both language & subject were borrowed, almost as though we had no thought nor feeling of our own, so that skylark nightingale in English Romantic poetry were simply converted into our *kuliawan* (oriole) and maya (rice bird)

- The apprenticeship was linguistic & cultural, but not in the literary or poetic art. “…because we simply had accomplished writers in Spanish, Tagalog, and the other native language.” We simply had to master another foreign language (English) and its poetic tradition (from Shakespeare---English Romantic & Victorian poets) and fit that foreign language & that foreign tradition to our own scene and sensibility.

- “…even as our poets in Spanish before the Americans came had already transformed both the sensibility & idiom of the Spanish Romantic spirit into a vehicle for the expression of our own depth in our own thought and feeling, not borrowed nor even adopted, but forged from our own depth in our own native clearing.”
Jose Garcia Villa first breaks the taboo on explicit sex, passion, and homosexuality in our fiction and poetry, e.g., his “Man-Songs” (1929) and his story, “Wings and Blue Flame” (1938).

Most certainly too our poets did not limit themselves to the subject of love (KAY DI BA ROMANTIC SPIRIT PA MAN ANG NAGA-PREVAIL SA ANI NA PERIOD/STAGE)

Their engagement with their own cultural and social milieu is in fact already signaled by our FIRST POEM IN ENGLISH, Ponciano Reyes’ “The Flood” in The Filipino Students’ Magazine (April 1905), published in Berkeley, California.

This engagement (which appears in our EARLY PATRIOTIC VERSES and reaches a clear and powerful expression in Amador T. Daguio’s “Man on Earth” (1932) and Carlos Bulosan’s “If You Want to Know What We Are” (1940) accounts for the liberation from Romantic themes and Romantic diction and imagery.

If Villa’s poetry made a clearing with English which showed the poets how, through craft and cunning, a language might be reinvented, Rafael Zulueta y da Costa’s “Like the Molave” (1940) opened again the poet’s sensibility to his own milieu where language is sharpened by the poet’s response to his own historical situation.

Zulueta’s Like the Molave and Villa’s Poem by Doveglion (1941) could very well mark the END OF THE ROMANTIC PHASE IN OUR POETRY.

With Like the Molave, it had become important for the poet to reshape the Romantic usage in order that he might find his own voice and address more directly his own time.

Villa, whose literary influence was e.e. Cummings, found his own voice (Have Come, Am Here; Volume 2 [1949]) in exile in America.

Then, the war came, and the Romantic efflorescence of the ‘30s wilted.

But he Romantic spirit did not vanish altogether. Villa continued writing until the ‘70s.

More importantly, we find in Bienvenido N. Santos’ The Wounded Stag (1956) & Edith Tiempo’s The Tracks of Babylon (1966) that the Romantic idiom has only been transformed into a new mode of expression by which the poet gave form and substance to his own insight.

I consulted another Gemino Abad critical essay (Mapping our Poetic Terrain: Filipino Poetry in English from 1905 to the Present) here to better understand his overwhelming and highfaluting introduction (sir’s required reading).

I would love to read all those Filipino poetry in English which have this what Gemino Abad calls “Romantic strain.” (now I’m getting curious… very curious.)