

Reticent Resolve:
The Poetry of Manuel A. Viray

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IN SPITE OF significant work in literary criticism, prose fiction, and poetry, Manuel A. Viray has a low profile in Philippine letters. If we are asked to name prominent Filipino poets, we are likely to think of Villa, Demetillo, and Angeles; we are unlikely to think of Viray. If we are to list notable prose writers, the list may be headed by Joaquin, Santos, and Linda Casper, not Viray. If we specify widely-known critics, perhaps Leonard Casper, Hosillos, and Bernad come immediately to mind; Viray probably will not.¹ Yet Viray has produced work worthy of comparison with these more visible writers.

Rullan correctly notes that Viray's poetry has "much to offer to any lover of literature" (118), and this view is seconded by Eberhart, Casper, and Santos as well as myself. Viray's prose fiction is equally fine, although it has been almost totally ignored by critics. Viray has the range of Steinbeck, the versatility to write the lush, atmospheric "Shawl from Kashmir" as well as such spare, sober stories of the Occupation as "Broken Glass" and "Dark Eyes." The former has the richness of texture of Lawrence Durrell's work and the latter ranks with the narratives of Edilberto Tiempo. Viray's criticism has had a major impact on the direction of post-war literature (see Grow 97 n. 28).

There are several reasons why Viray's poetry, at least, is less known than, in my judgment at least, it deserves to be. One is that Viray has been very reluctant to assert himself. He deliberated for more than ten years before seeking book publication for his poems and even then approached Phoenix Publishing House only indirectly, through Agcaoili (Sibal v). He excluded from the book many poems which had previously appeared only in

magazines,² and of those he did publish in his only book of poetry, *After This Exile* (hereafter cited as *ATE*) in 1963, many were previously unrecognized as his because he had used pseudonyms (Viray, *ATE* x).

This reticence is an extension of Viray's poetic technique: highly-controlled, quietly-powerful assertion, usually muted by oblique syntax, off-rhyme, and other devices of indirection. Viray has the restraint and apparent objectivity of T. S. Eliot; he has no need to shout, because his highly-refined craftsmanship permits him to be affective with probing diction rather than exclamation. Prime examples are the villanelles "Variations on the Earth's Slip and Fault" (*ATE* 57) and "Reflexion" (*ATE* 58). "Variations" reads:

The seasons have brief moments of rapture.
Amid our ennui the lusty leaves emphasize
Earth's dark alchemy: rot, growth, and fissure.

Balanced, the senses glowing visions conjure
But summer torpor gives; leaves and flesh incise
What flame trees coax; the desires will can't exorcise.

Every season has its moods of rapture.
Now altered, the leaves blaze, fall, then conjure
Recall of things past and pretty; then entice
Us to view the body's faults and fissure.

In the dazzling snow, the pine trees endure.
Winter's long rigor, now all slush, can't disguise
Earth's dark chemistry, rot, growth, and fissure.

We fish, sun blazing overhead: the texture
And calm of the Bay lulls the flesh and eyes
That faulted soon decline from rapture.

Seasons and bodies change: only visions endure.
Underneath all texture the basic tension lies.
The seasons have their brief moods of rapture.
So do the senses with their fault and fissure.

Set against the most famous villanelle in the language, Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," "Variations" and "Reflexion" seem to have an almost casual, bland

tone. Yet read with attention, they have an important impact that belies such superficial impressions.

"Variations" asserts quite directly that "Underneath all texture the basic tension lies." The poetically generated tension between stasis and movement makes full use of the villanelle's capacity to present a theme with variations. "Earth's dark alchemy" in stanza one becomes "Earth's dark chemistry" in stanza four; the earth's "rot, growth, and fissure" of stanza one change to "the body's faults and fissure" in stanza three, return to "rot, growth, and fissure" in stanza four (but are ascribed to "Earth's dark chemistry") and then shift to "the senses with their fault and fissure" in the poem's concluding line. These variations have one constant: fissure. This is appropriate, granted that the variables are all much more mutable: rot, growth, and body and sense faults are biological phenomena, whereas a fissure is geological.

However, an undercurrent of irony erodes this neat polarization between stasis and mutability. We first detect it in line three. The colon following "alchemy" suggests that "rot," "growth," and "fissure" are its components. But alchemy sought permanence and the prevention of "rot." Its goal, gold, was impervious to attacks by any acid or alkaline solution then known and so was thought to be the key to immortality. "Growth" too entails transmutation, as much a threat to stable immortality as "rot." And "fissure" means "cleavage," the opposite of the imperviousness to "corruption" (the alchemists' term) of chemicals. The shift from "alchemy" to "chemistry" in stanza four reflects the triumph of process (mutability) over product (stability). And another irony lies in the first line of the closing stanza: "Seasons and bodies change: only visions endure." This seemingly authoritative, even aphoristic, claim is refuted by the logic of the remainder of the poem. We are informed in line four that "the senses glowing visions conjure" and in the last two lines of the poem that the senses have "brief moods of rapture." How can a vision conjured by a *brief mood* of rapture endure? This problem is compounded by the suggestions of illusion in "can't exorcise," "conjure," "entice," and "lulls."

Viray's point is that there is no constant, at least no absolute constant. Geological process can function as a constant for biological process (or at least as a touchstone), but it is itself relative. We realize this as soon as we perceive the ambiguity of the title. How can there be a variation of *the slip* or *the fault*? This is impossible, since "the" and the singular "earth," "slip," and "fault" assert that there is just one slip and one fault; an entity cannot be a variation of itself. But variation is possible if "slip" and "fault" mean "error" as well as "plate movement." The "fault" ("slip" as well) of the senses is simply their destruction by time; as lines 15-16 have it, "calm of the Bay lulls the flesh and eyes / That faulted soon decline from rapture." "Decline" means both "reduction in capacity" and, applied in an astronomical context, "sink toward setting." "Variations," then, is a poem of substance; when its thematic and artistic intricacies are perceived by the reader, it has considerable force.

Yet the meditative-descriptive poem, especially the Coleridgean conversation poem, has provided Viray the best genre for his tonal intent, though he is often equally successful with narrative structures. The systolic pattern of the conversation poem is modified by Viray to accommodate his thematic exploration of the evanescence of existence. He will move from concrete observation to abstract conclusion, back to concrete observation, or vice versa, or he will mingle the observation and conclusion, as he does in "Rock Creek Park" (*ATE* 47). This Frost-like poem, with its winter landscape setting, its child subjects, and its pithy final generalization, opens with a generalized remark ("Seasonally *we* live with rites and rubble" [my emphasis]), makes explicit its meditative nature ("The mind, pushing beyond the glare of snow, / Speckled, speckling the bleakness of wintry trees"), and then focuses concretely on Viray's daughters' snowballing (Divides my three girls' excited babble / As romping in sloping Rock Creek Park . . ." [ll. 1-5]). At line 16 the generalized outlook of the beginning subtly supplants the specific focus on children snowballing: "Especially at six when from the office routines peter / Out in the dark like the bestial aches in the blood / That plague *us*, having lost *our* innocence" (my emphasis).

The tone of reflection is appropriate for Viray's principal theme: mutability.³ As he puts it in "Rock Creek Park," "The clear brows and smiling eyes flash in nostalgic mood / Gently touching the tired flesh, and caress the sense / Of long unexperienced rapture, identities that may not endure" (ll. 20-22). Frequently Viray represents the instability of existence with the cycle of the seasons, especially autumn. A season never establishes itself; it is here, then gone, as Viray suggests in the title "Autumn's Quick Dark" (*ATE* 45-46). In Viray's view, autumn, like the other seasons, has none of the culminating amplitude that Keats ascribes to it. There are no overflowing granaries, no ripe gourds. Although "Autumn's dark and chill / Are seasonal," "so are the revels of the young" (ll. 32-33). There is no accumulation; there never is a time of plenty, as "Rock Creek Park" and "Autumn's Quick Dark" together imply.⁴

In the meditative poems Viray seeks a rationale for this transiency. His most explicit conclusion appears in "The Letters" (6-7), a poem literally dealing with the Logos:

For some time now there have been these
 letters: internal, errant,
 at times wobbly, at times
 indecipherable, limning the glow
 of morning, of touch, of memory:
 they flutter fast past the night,
 the dawn, and those of us who weep. (ll. 42-48)

We simply must accept the fact that reality itself is "errant," "at times wobbly, at times indecipherable." Thus, Viray's tone remains subdued; there is no possible benefit to us if we "rage, rage, against the dying of the light." Viray concurs with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross that death is simply the final stage of life — as Viray would have it, as Autumn concludes the seasonal cycle — so we should maintain our dignity. To show how indecipherable the letters really are, Viray utilizes oxymoron: "limning the glow / of morning" (does the "glow of morning" have a sharply-defined outline and "flutter fast"?⁵). Contributing to the same effect is the reversed order of stanzas four and five.⁶ Logic would suggest telling the reader what the letters are (ll. 42-48, quoted above) before describing what they do:

The letters wobble, disappear, sparkle,
 burnishing nostalgia, and the
 onset of illusions which, when
 young we misconstrued — and hence
 sought to reverse reverses,
 to discern insight before death
 and banality, saw only excision
 of young blood, mouth, and reason
 — and sanity. (ll. 33-41)

This stanza supports the conclusion that reality is indeed errant and indecipherable. Suppose we had construed, rather than misconstrued, the illusions. Would we then have been able “to discern insight before death / and banality”? How could an illusion lead to insight? Even had illusion been illuminating, we could not be certain what “before” involved. If it meant “logically prior,” we might have gained something; for example, we might have been led to insight rather than to death. But “before” might only have meant gaining insight chronologically prior to death, in which case the insight would have had no enduring value.

Viray’s ontological stance is a “tiptoe effect” involving meaning and meaninglessness. Often, a poetic statement will make sense overall (or seem to) but will contain an inscrutable detail; or, a poem will start out clearly and then lose its cogency. For example, the first two stanzas of “Declivities” (10-11), whose very title labels this pattern, are straightforward, but in stanza three the literal sense dissolves:

What atmosphere engages pulses with
 change unforeseen, the first
 touch, the first clasp, patterns
 that embracing bone past flesh
 and sensuousness appear
 to shimmer but is darkness —
 obdurate, deceiving. (ll. 16-22)

What can an atmosphere engage? How can a pattern embrace anything? (Perhaps it could encompass something.) What bone is “past” (beyond?) flesh and sensuousness? At this point the syntax becomes obscure. “Appear” is plural, evidently, therefore, taking “patterns” as its subject; but the singular “is” must refer back to “What atmosphere engages.” Reconstructed in this man-

ner, the sentence would read “patterns appear to shimmer, but what atmosphere engages is darkness — obdurate, deceiving.” The statement is like Eliot’s famous “Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table.” There is no precisely paraphrased meaning, yet the statement seems coherent. It can be construed to mean something like “patterns — that is, structure, rationality — appear to waver in their existence, but there is no doubt that what atmosphere engages is consistently unreal — that is, illusory.” This seems to be generally the same idea as that expressed in “The Letters” — that reality is errant — but the syntactical permutation makes it impossible to be certain. The next stanza carries the meaning uncertainty to the point of obfuscation:

Which is to say the minutiae of
awakening, the pattern of
rarefied change and air and
cosmos; the tender palm holding
orchid, flaming rose, or cupped,
startles rhythms and anatomy,
beyond all rooms, beyond choice
and plan.

To reinforce his ontological thesis, Viray writes some poems of perfect clarity — “Balances” (*ATE* 38-39) and “A Winter Walk” (*ATE* 48-49), for instance, and other poems in which there is just a little obscurity. In “Dark Theme” (*ATE* 19), for instance, the last two lines (“There is this then: the same dark tragic theme: / We bury the dead but resurrect fault and name”) have no bearing on the theme of the rest of the poem, contained in the aphorism “Desire the young explain; doom the old explicate” (l. 12). Again, in “Essentiality” the last half of the closing line, “To child the milk, to man the weed,” relates to nothing else in the poem. This might, at first glance, be especially surprising in a poem designed to identify the essence of life (as the title suggests), but Viray wishes to present the whole spectrum of manifestations of reality, from crystal clear to murky. This is probably what led Eberhart to identify “a sort of fum-

bling quality" and a "teeming sense of the world" in his poems (xiii).

The technical aspects of Viray's poems support his viewpoint that the existent is tenuous. One case in point is the deceptive structure of *After This Exile*. The chronological / geographical partitioning into "The Borne" (poems from the Philippines), "Beyond the Pulse" (poems from the U.S.) seems set. But, as Casper notes, "... the volume's two-part division is only outwardly decided by chronology and place; poems from Manila, poems from Washington. Rather, as these capitals epitomize whole cultures and hemispheres, they also engage and reflect each other" (xvii). Even this apparently unequivocal pattern is not so unequivocal.

The range of poems also excludes an unalterable pattern. Viray utilizes genres ranging from the dramatic monologue (e.g., "Appointment," *ATE* 59-60) to the sonnet (e.g., "Night, Balance Upon These Eyelids," *ATE* 26) to the villanelles discussed earlier. He does not hesitate to imbue a poem with an archaic flavour; "Exiles" (*ATE* 30) ends with this: "Your laugh and loveliness / This love oppress; this heart exile to endless rue." "Tis the Mind" (*ATE* 32) is almost Miltonic in its handling of subject matter and, in places, in its diction.

Among the most intricate of Viray's techniques for conveying his thesis about reality's tenuousness is his "rhythmic phrasing rather than metered lines; and the pattern of rhymes is not so much a 'scheme' as an unobtrusive arrangement, its illusion of randomness reinforced often by the use of slant rhymes" (Casper xvii). Viray uses slant rhyme as well as Amy Lowell does in "Patterns" and for the same reason: to hint at, rather than to demand, the presence of a stable pattern. One of the most impressive examples of Viray's subtlety is "Dreams When We Wake Up" (8-9), in which slant rhyme, true rhyme, and internal rhyme are combined in sufficient quantity to be perceived by scansion and yet remain irregular and in the background.

As was the case with syntax and range of poetic genres and styles, however, the degree of regularity in rhythm and rhyme runs the gamut from metronomical to almost non-existent. "The Neighboring Fence" (*ATE* 14) features true-rhymed tercets and

comes full circle, from "In Nature's Secrecy" (l. 3) to "Nature's quiet anarchy" (l. 21), and so is very strictly structured. So is "O Naked World, Inheritor, Etc." (*ATE* 27), which has quatrains and, with two exceptions, true rhyme throughout. "The Mornings and the Ticker Tapes" (*ATE* 53-56) has irregularly-sized stanzas and rhyme predominant in the first half but only occasional in the second half.

Viray also frequently uses personification to keep reality from becoming fully established. In "O Naked World, Inheritor, Etc.," for example, we find "I have seen the nerveless frustrations eyeing / Me with despair . . ." (ll. 5-6) and "the wife pats a counsel on her son's head / To cross the mocking street . . ." (ll. 9-10). Less often Viray will work with devices such as ambiguity, alliteration, paradox, and zeugma, as he does in "Elegy I" (*ATE* 29) :

In dappled shade, streetlamp lights what we conceive
 Inevitable need as turning off the clock
 Before lying wanton, careless. Before the lock
 Turns out the city noise and light, we believe,
 Moving in sensuous sternness of our acts,
 There's no betrayal of illusion save by fact.

"If in dreams responsibilities begin"
 And fiery changes in the almond body look
 More illusive than warmth, kiss, or touch, crook
 The arms around the wanton head, for within,
 Lost to sensuous whims, dreams scorn the facts
 And there's no rehearsal for vital acts.

As lamp goes out, early morn dapples windowsill
 And identifying our bodies, naked, clear, racks
 Hollow of cheek and fear. Moments are never still
 And we, in warm wantonness, turn to wax,
 For in the betrayal of illusion by fact,
 Even fleshless bodies are by weather sacked.

In the last stanza, especially, Viray achieves a delicate balance of coherence and chaos. The consonance is an ordering device; the ambiguity, paradoxes, and zeugma work to disintegrate the thought. Does "turn to wax" mean to melt (hence destroy) or to harden and thus preserve (as in a wax museum)? Both "warm" and "wantonness" support "melt," but the preceding sentence,

“. . . identifying our bodies, naked, clear, *racks* / Hollow of cheek and fear” (my emphasis), suggests a rigid structure. “Hollow of cheek” may even imply “skeleton,” as the last line, “Even fleshless bodies are by weather sacked,” certainly does. “Betrayal of illusion by fact” is a paradox; it not only reverses our normal assumptions, it seems an impossibility. It is certainly possible to betray a dream or an ideal, but can one betray illusion? Perhaps, but by no means certainly. The uncertainty, in fact, is stressed throughout the poem, thus enhancing the tiptoe effect, the precarious balance between coherence and chaos. The poem starts in “dappled shade,” neither full light nor full darkness. The street lamp lights what we conceive as an inevitable need — but is our conception correct? We only believe (not know) that “there’s no betrayal of illusion save by fact.”

All of stanza two’s assertions hinge on a condition — “if in dreams responsibilities begin’ ” — and this condition seems rather more implausible than plausible. Does waking reality bring with it no responsibility? Why should there be a need for responsibility in a dream state? The conditional assertion itself is not necessarily even favoured by the narrator, as the quotation marks suggest. Stanza three is set in morning’s dappled light, surely no more illuminating than evening’s in stanza one. Although this light supposedly identifies “our bodies, naked, clear,” the clarity is impermanent: “Moments are never still / And we, in warm wantonness, turn to wax.” Can we identify our bodies as clearly after this transformation has occurred as we could (supposedly) before? No; we have just been told that “Moments are never still.” Nothing remains constant to be identified, and this conclusion is reinforced in the last line. “Sacked” could mean “clothed” (as in “sack dress” or “sack cloth”), “looted,” “cashiered” (that is, destroyed), “packaged” (that is, put into a sack for transport), or, colloquially, “put into bed in order to make love.”

Even “fleshless bodies” presents a problem. How can there be a fleshless body? Surely, if “fleshless,” the body would be a skeleton, not a body. Either a body or a skeleton could be put into a body bag for transport and either could be further reduced by

the elements (weather could pillage or even utterly destroy). As if these complications were insufficient, we must not overlook the possibility that "fleshless bodies are by weather sacked" means that when external conditions are inclement, people "hit the sack," as the colloquialism has it, to make love. This reading contributes to the dimension of life in the poem that, notwithstanding its title, is at least as concerned with life and love-making as it is with death. In fact, only lines 6, 7, 13, 15, and 17 do *not* pursue this theme. (In line 1, "conceive" may carry associations of "become pregnant.") In sum, with five different meanings at least possible, there is no stable base of meaning identifiable.

The intricately-constructed stanzas also help to establish the tiptoe effect. Each stanza contains six lines of predominantly iambic rhythm pattern. But the average number of feet is five and a half, just irregular enough to keep the reader conscious of the tension between coherence and chaos. Likewise, the rhyme scheme, *abbacc* and *deedcc* in the first two stanzas, changes to *dfdcc* in the last. Even the constant, the *cc* rhyme, uses singular forms in the first and third stanzas and a plural variant in the second. Viray is thus able to present multifaceted meanings which reflect his ontological outlook: reality is never fixed but instead fluctuates according to at least two major factors — observer perception and the relentless transformations brought about by time.

Clearly, then, Casper was correct when he described *After This Exile* as "craftsmanship elevated to an art" (xviii). Viray is a poet with the insight to explore the ontological status of existence and with the well-honed art to create poems with the "tiptoe effect" which his fine sensitivity suggests they should have. As he says, "We (I) linger on the retrospective / descent of the skeleton" ("Declivities" (11)). How can we linger now if the descent is retrospective; i.e. in the past? How, in any case, can we linger (that is, be unmoving) *on* a descent (a downward movement)? The answer is, in each case, provided by the allusion to Darwin. The descent entails biological inheritance and therefore progression, not regression. (Bronowski confirms this familiar meaning in *The Ascent of Man*, where his title echoes "descent" as a tacit synonym rather than antonym.) We linger

now because the progression, though started in the past and thus retrospective, is ongoing. We are therefore in a tiptoe position, experiencing at present neither forward nor retrograde motion, but that static condition will not last: we may tarry but we will not put down roots.

NOTES

- ¹ Perhaps this is why he is so little anthologized. Thirty years into his career he was represented only in Agcaoili, and then by just one poem and one short story. Occasionally his work has been republished abroad — in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Literature East and West*, *The Literary Review*, and *The Antioch Review*, for example — but such republishing has been neither regular nor extensive. Viray's literary criticism is even less widely disseminated. Cruz, for instance, does not even mention him. This situation has, of course, in turn contributed to his invisibility.
- ² Some of these exclusions, of course, reflect not reticence but the mature Viray's realization that such poems as "Death Takes a Lover" and "II. Late November" were apprentice works. Such prose-poem lines as "*But then spring died somewhere. As in a troubled dream he was no longer there. Night effaced him away. He left her with the rain of darkness cold and biting on her face: and the emptiness of the air*" demonstrate the wisdom of selective republication. "II. Late November," however, shows that by age nineteen Viray had developed his lifelong themes — the decay reflected in seasonal progression, the pain of deterioration, often personified, and the recollected lust of youth.
- ³ Rullan seems to me far off track when he asserts that "The theme of Manuel A. Viray's poems — man is heir to both grace and misery — is neither clear nor categorical. As a matter of fact, most, if not all of the poems, seem to refute this thesis" (117). These two statements are contradictory, but even if they were not, Viray is far more profound a poet than such an obvious theme would permit him to be. Again, I can find nothing in *After This Exile* to support Rullan's notion that "he moans and yearns for a complete end of misery so that grace may abound" (116). Viray does not concern himself with grace at all, and I can find no tone of either moaning or yearning. The astonishing title of Rullan's review article — "Amazing Grace" — seems to me a singularly inappropriate descriptor for *After This Exile*.
- ⁴ Apparently by design. The three-word titles rhyme, and the first line of "Rock Creek Park" — "Seasonally we live with rites and rubble" — is a compressed version of the last line of "Autumn's Quick Dark": "Seasonally we live with rites, music, dogs and rubble." And the "revels of the young" in "Autumn's Quick Dark" are surely the snowball throwing of Viray's children in "Rock Creek Park." This is another case of Viray's highly-wrought reticence. He creates a pattern so refined that it is almost undetectable, though it affects the reader who does not consciously detect it.
- ⁵ Cf. "In the Blood Revealed" (*ATE* 25), where the expression "palpable as summer" (l. 10) is almost ironic.
- ⁶ Cf. "Rock Creek Park," which reverses the normal systolic/diastolic movement of the conversation poem.

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