Naturally Post-Modern: 
A Confluence of Bikol Poetry as Read in the 
Naturally Post-Modern Way 

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_Sagurong_. Paz Verdades M. Santos and Kristian Sendon Cordero, eds.  

The regional writer must be naturally post-modern and post-colonial. Struggling against the centrist or the centrally located critic and reader, the regional _id est_, local writer/editor/publisher has to contend with his/her place in the Imperial sun. It is not only in the geographical sense but also in the nominal manner that those in the periphery/margin are only peripheralized or marginalized because some groups or associations have declared themselves to be in the center, at the core, or in the site of critical potency. As stated, the centrality of individuals and their works is a declaration and not the truth nor the essence of power. And, also because, in this debate that is triggered by location, the position of the essentialist is not only _not_ essential, but one that is readily open to attacks from, of course, those who have yielded metaphorical centrality by virtue and/or by fault of physical considerations, and not by intellectual application. Some years back, those who—by virtue of locality and being local—are not the focal points of literary developments would resort to appropriating the values and cast of the central. The template is sourced at the origin, which is dominant and determinedly coming from the middle, imagined or established by fiat. Books are written with the audience in the metropolis in mind. Where the book publisher and the writer are not certain the head church of readers would heed the manuscripts from the chapels of intellects in the imaginary hinterlands, then translation is resorted to, footnotes
are enriched with the acumen of 16th century Philippine missionaries. The process exoticizes further the non-urban, the non-central, creating in the process identities that are marked to be different. The Other is othered for that is the only way to market these manuscripts from the edge.

Some years ago, or some five years ago, just for the sake of demarcation, the book “Sagurong,” a compilation of Bikol poems or rawitdawit, could have been that—an exotic work from the exotic Kabikolan. The outsider’s charm/power of the collection would be underpinned, not theoretically but ideologically, by the publication being local. Some years ago, it would have been also by natural constraint that the editors and publishers would choose the poems, situate them in the context of the poets and the places where one could affix the individual or clustered literary imaginations of the respective contributors.

But that was some years ago. Without diminishing the sense and achievement of the editors and, again, their respective implication about poetics, the victory of Sagurong, if I may continue with the combative posturing this review has initiated, comes with the independent creative purport of literature from the off-central. The anthology seemingly is charting its own trajectory, travelling to a point that it knows because the terra is not incognita but one that is supremely known. Here we are in our native land and we are the travelers and we are the guides. The landmarks are known and there is no need for markers or signposts.

The result is an anthology of Bikol poetry with no translation. Years ago, this was unthinkable. A question that would have come up would have been “what about those who do not understand the Bikol language?” One senses that the editors did not find the decision to not translate difficult. In the absence of translation, one is left to face the works in their original state although again since there is no translated state, the original state as a notional phase does not exist anymore.

Interestingly—and this would be the politics of the anthology—the collection does not even warrant that all of the Bikolano readers would understand all the Bikol poems. No interrogation takes place as to investigate how the presentation would be done. The collection also implicates itself in the thick of the identity debate about what it is to be Bikol or Bikolano. The implication is, however, brief and proves to be insignificant because no attempt to
standardize the Bikol language is done. In fact, untouched and unremarked, the Bikol language expands to manifold languages. From these languages arise the dominant signs and symbols in this work: a language that refuses to be a single stone of signification because it has been repressed as such. Closted, it now makes itself manifest in all its splendor. That word can be a hyperbole needing justification for the outsider. As this reviewer puts himself inside the matrix of Bikol Naga/Bikol Buhi/Bikol Masbateño, the use of splendor needs no defense. The ethnocentric finds its day in the face of the Colonial being extinguished.

There are concessions—if one can call them as such—that the two editors provide. One concession is couched in the title, Sagurong. Eschewing themes and categorizations, two natural tendencies of the modern writer, the anthologists articulate the word, Sagurong, not by translation, which bows to the colonial mind, but by an act that attempts to recover known and unknown meanings of the word. Santos and Cordero proceed to demystify the title and, ipso facto, the collection and the contents, by agreeing that it is not about the quotidian’s downspout. The co-editors recollect their fieldwork data about the agrarian practice of setting up a link of bamboo that is attached to a water source. In a farm area where farmers do not have access to irrigation systems, they resort to the sagurong: Sa siring na pangyayari asin kamugtakan, an satuyang para-oma, minakua nin sarong halabaon na kawayan, tataison nin sundang an puro sagkod na magtarom, dangan idadasok sa sarong gilid nin bulod kun sain hinohona niyang may burabod (p. ix).

Santos and Cordero posit the query about how the farmers ever get to know the source of wellspring. What happens is that the farmers do discover the spring from which sa “puon, paturo-turo sana, dangan, madagos-dagos na digding mahurabod an mahamis, buhay na tubig na inumon, panglinig, pangkarigos, pambubo sa mga tinanom” (p. ix). The editors are really comparing the writings from Bikol poets as trickles and effluence, not in terms of the body of works but in the historical development of the craft. The book/anthology, according to Santos and Cordero, is really dedicated to the Bikol reader and those who have, years back, written in Bikol languages, paving the way for the present crop of writers.

The metaphor of the water is an unimpeded current in the introduction written by Santos, a writer and literary critic, and Cordero, himself a laurelled poet. In the end of the introduction,
the two disclose the avowed goals of the writings and why these works, like the water left to follow the surge but tapped nonetheless to surge by means of the contraption called “sagurong.” These goals are still water-based, the metonymy retained about how the “dagsuso” or surge of the writings can “bagunas” or scrape off the dirt and detritus of colonialism. The two editors have said it in Bikol language and, in the spirit of this anthology, the reader can find out the words used by going back to the source, the book itself.

As for the poems in the collection, they come from all sources and origins, like the water in the sagurong again, and are gathered as a surge, a force. The force is in their natural state: the spelling varies, the annotations are not given, the styles and forms are different. The poems cannot be subjected to Western literary traditions of reading because the writers are writing in cultures that are not subjected to that kind of reading. It must be said, in passing, that what Archibald MacLeish articulates in *Ars Poetica*, about how poems “should not mean but be,” is subverted here. Poems in this collection take on different sounds and airs when presented. In the tradition of colonial education where English poems are memorized and recited, the poems in the collection partake of the same tradition.

As a footnote, the book was launched by way of a reading. It must be noted that this writer was in the launch and witnessed how many of the poems appearing solemn and formal now in written form jumped off from those pages and became spectacular performance pieces. The poem about a particular variety of sour mango as read by the poet himself, Dennis Bascuña Gonzaga, sweetened itself into a masterpiece of double entendre [See “Indian Mango,” p. 52]. Despite the flurry of exclamation points, the poem, “Naglalangkaw na an Tubig,” [p. 78] remains elegiac and stately on print. But, as read by its writer, Victor Dennis Nierva, the poem turned into a theatrical piece of cautionary tale and advocacy. Were Merlinda Bobis around during the reading, would she have approved the interpretation of her poem “Puso ki Batag” [p. 23]? Alternately coquettish, alternately sentimental, the poem can be a gendered act of faith or a subversion of everything feminine about the heart and, well, the heart of the Banana.

All this brings us to these significant questions: Do Bikol poems become different poetry when read? Are Bikol poetry necessarily performative and performatory? Does a Bikol poet complete himself or herself when he or she is able to read the poem?
Theories have a way of liberating new thoughts and directions from old perspectives. The post-modern theories have killed the individual poet and set off the text into a vortex or even a community of interpreters. But the same set of theories murdering the romantic figure of the sullen/solemn/introspective/irreverent poet resurrects the writer with his agenda, this form called Bikol poet and his words in *rawitdawit* out to remove with the water of his own literary traditions and practices those vestiges and visages of colonial versification.

These are the achievements of this anthology called “Sagurong,” which draws from the many wells and wellspring of the Bikol language, and its editors who simply and merely refuse to translate, in the process giving birth to the next generation of readers who will have to learn the Bikol languages. The situation is very much like that of an opera aficionado who goes out of his way to learn Italian or, at least, some phrases, if he is to savor the works of Verdi or Puccini. Or that of an *otaku* who enrolls in a Nihonggo class if only to be able to understand an anime or to read a manga.

In the case of Bikol *rawitdawit*, no translations are available right now. But there is “Sagurong” for the Bikol reader of Bikol poetry and he or she may not necessarily be Bikolano or Bicolano. In the interstices of the transnational lurks the local.

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