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BIENVENIDO N. SANTOS: FILIPINO OLD-TIMERS IN LITERATURE

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Bienvenido N. Santos:
Filipino Old-Timers in Literature

King-Kok Cheung

More fortunate than the nostalgic characters in his fiction, Bienvenido N. Santos has been able to return to the Philippines, his beloved country. Born there in 1911, he first came to the U.S. in 1941 and was forced to remain because of World War II. After the war he went back to the Philippines and became the president of Legazpi College. He came to America again in 1957, where he once more prolonged his stay, this time because he was unwilling to live under the martial law declared back home. During this extensive stay he worked first in the creative writing program of the State University of Iowa and then as professor of English and Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at Wichita State University, Kansas. He retired from Wichita State in 1982 and returned, at long last, to his native country in 1986—after the change of regime under Corazon Aquino.

Although ten volumes of Santos's work have been published in the Philippines, his first book to appear in the U.S. was the award-winning Scent of Apples: A Collection of Stories. In this collection the author sensitively depicts the plight of the "old-timers"—Filipinos who came to America between the 1920s and 1940s. Asked to explain the difference between the old-timers in fiction and in real life, he remarked: "There is nothing to explain because there is no difference. If any, it is more in the manner of telling than in what is told." In telling their stories he focuses on how monotonous realities provoke visionary escapes and how isolation fosters intimacy. These experiences, though by no means particular to the old-timers, are the motifs that recur in his stories largely because of the special historical circumstances under which these early Filipino settlers struggled. Their endless drudgery in America often provokes visions or illusions about the homeland; their isolation in America fosters a special intimacy—the intimacy among those who are ostracized. In his quiet and penetrating manner, Santos captures the bitter-sweet flavor of these experiences, notably in the eponymous "Scent of Apples" and in "The Day the Dancers Came." Highlighting the humanity of a people regarded as inhuman by the dominant culture, he both reflects and reinterprets their life.

The two motifs—loneliness and intimacy, realities and visions—are woven together in "Scent." The protagonist, Celestino Fabia, travels thirty miles on a windy night to attend a talk given by the narrator, revealing his longing to see a fellow Filipino: "I've seen no Filipino for so many years now . . . So when I saw your name in the papers where it says you come from the islands and that you're going to talk, I come right away" (21-22). Fabia—a farmer in Michigan—has long been away from his native country, but he continues to cherish and even idealize it, especially its women. After the lecture, he asks, "Are our Filipino women the same like they were twenty years ago?" (22). The question gives the narrator pause:

"I weighed my answer carefully . . . it seemed to me that moment as I looked towards my countryman, I must give him an answer that would not make him so unhappy. Surely, all these years, he must have held on to certain ideals, certain beliefs, even illusions peculiar to the exile (22-23). Troubled by Fabia's sad look, the narrator knows that preserving and sustaining the exile's ideal—about women long ago and far away—will make his countryman happier. After asking Fabia what Filipino women were like in the past, he answers reassuringly that despite superficial changes "they are the same as they were twenty years ago. God-fearing, faithful, modest, and nice." He describes Fabia's reaction:

The man was visibly moved. "I'm very happy, sir," he said, in the manner of one who, having stakes on the land, had found no cause to regret one's sentimental investment (23).

The narrator does not have the heart to disillusion the visionary Pinoy, who idealizes the women in his native land. He later observes how Fabia fondles the picture of a Filipino woman which he picked up in a hotel room many years ago: "It was yellow and soiled with many fingerings. The faded figure of a woman in Philippine dress could yet be distin-
guished although the face had become a blur” (27). The indistinct image suggests that the actual appearance of the figure matters little; what attracts the protagonist is not so much the person in the photo as the ideal the image symbolizes: the native country. The tantalizing ideal sustains and adds color to his dull life on the American farm. Disenchanted with his immediate environment, Fabia reminisces wistfully about the remote, the inaccessible. As the narrator reflects on his way to Fabia’s farm, “All the beauty . . . seemed in the distance” (25).

But in fact, as Fabia later confides to the narrator, no one in the cherished homeland would welcome the nostalgic exile. For some unstated reason Fabia was repudiated by his family when he was a young man in the Philippines: “I saw mother cry wordlessly as father heaped his curses upon me and drove me out of the house, the gate closing heavily after me. And my brothers and sisters took up my father’s hate for me and multiplied it numberless times . . .” (26). When the narrator offers to visit the outcast’s native village, Fabia declines the kind offer: “Thanks a lot. But, you see, nobody would remember me now” (29). He fully realizes that what was once home is no longer home, that he would be a stranger in his native village.

The only family Fabia has now is the one in America. Unlike many of his counterparts in California, he was able to marry, in Michigan where the anti-miscegenation laws were not enforced.5 But although he has a devoted Caucasian wife (Ruth) and an endearing son (Roger), the word “lonely” is used repeatedly (twice on p. 25 alone) by the narrator to describe Fabia. While the family is closely knit, it seems cut off from the rest of the world. Upon seeing their house, the narrator thinks of “the cottages of the poor colored folk in the south, the hovels of the poor everywhere in the land.” But their shanty nevertheless stands out:

This one stood all by itself as though by common consent all the folk that used to live here had decided to stay away, despising it, ashamed of it. Even the lovely season could not color it with beauty (26).

Their seclusion is not difficult to explain. In the early forties an interracial couple in America would, more often than not, be spurned by the white community.

Paradoxically, this separateness—the shunning—heightens intimacy. When Fabia was suffering an attack of acute appendicitis, Ruth courageously saved his life:

It was deep winter. The snow lay heavy everywhere. Ruth was pregnant and none too well herself. . . . She shoveled the snow from their front door and practically carried the suffering man on her shoulders, dragging him through the newly made path towards the road where they waited for the U.S. Mail car to pass. Meanwhile snowflakes poured all over them and she kept rubbing the man’s arms and legs as she herself nearly froze to death.

“Go back to the house, Ruth!” her husband cried, “you’ll freeze to death.”

But she clung to him wordlessly. . . .

Ruth’s a nice girl,” said Fabia, “like our own Filipino women” (28).

The heavy winter snow cannot take away the warmth of the couple’s mutual solicitude, which overcomes both the hostile elements and their own debilitating human frailties. Yet the highest compliment Fabia can give his wife is her similarity to Filipino women. In his deep nostalgia for the homeland, it never occurs to him that the woman who has borne all hardship with him, who has suffered discrimination for his sake, may possibly excel the countrywomen of his dreams.

Though condemned to live away from his homeland and from the rest of America, Fabia is blessed not only with a faithful wife, who stays with him through his worst moments, but also with a disarming child. He describes Roger’s reaction upon hearing that a “first class Filipino” (i.e., the narrator) will come to dine with them: “What’s he like, daddy, he asks. Oh, you will see, I says [sic], he’s first class. Like you daddy? No, no, I laugh at him, your daddy ain’t first class. Aw, but you are, daddy, he says” (24). The recounted dialogue captures the intimate rapport between father and son; Roger esteems Fabia highly notwithstanding his actual, pariah, status.

Through this dialogue Santos not only highlights the close kinship in a bleak environment but also wins us over to Roger’s perspective. We are made to feel that the son is right: Fabia, by virtue of his gentle demeanor, his faith in goodness, and his warm hospitality, is indeed a “first class Filipino.” While the physical and living conditions of his family are pathetic, their magnanimity and solidarity are admirable. Their very isolation tightens the familial bond.

Equally striking as the familial bond is the instant bond of friendship formed between the two Filipino men, men who belong to different classes, who have never met before, and who will probably never meet again: the narrator is going back to the Philippines while Fabia will remain forever in America. After taking his guest back to the hotel, Fabia said, “Well, I guess I won’t be seeing you again.”

It was dimly lighted in front of the hotel and I could hardly see Fabia’s face. Without getting off the car, he moved to where I had sat, and I saw him extend his hand.

I gripped it.

“Tell Ruth and Roger,” I said, “I love them” (28-29).

The story ends with both a sense of loneliness and a sense of fellowship: the touching of hands at once heightens and softens the sorrow of parting. Fabia knows that he will not see the narrator again, but the narrator’s handgrip and profession of love affirm the friendship. Despite their brief acquaintance, Fabia has revealed to the narrator the most intimate details of his life, from his shameful repudiation by his family in the Philippines to his gratitude toward his steadfast wife. The narrator has touched the lives of Fabia, Ruth, and Roger. They feel honored to have a “first class Filipino” dine with them. But the narrator himself is also touched; the scent of apples will always evoke in him the memory of the cordial old-timer and his family.

Like Fabia, the protagonist of “The Day the Dancers Came”—Fil—also has emotional stakes in the homeland; but Fil will find cause to regret his sentimental investment. Just as Fabia drives a long distance to hear a fellow Filipino talk and to cultivate friendship with the newcomer, Fil looks forward to attending a performance by a Filipino dancing troupe and to entertaining the overseas dancers. The visitors from
the native country evoke both nostalgia and excitement in the expatriates, whose lives abroad have been rather vapid.

Like Fabia, Fil has worked hard and long in America, at jobs that provide little excitement:

To a new citizen, work meant many places and many ways. . . . As a maul in a hospital in Cook County, all day he handled filth and gore. He came home smelling of surgical soap and disinfectant. In the hospital, he took charge of a row of bottles on a shelf, each bottle containing a stage of the human embryo in preservatives. . . . He had nightmares through the years of himself inside a bottle (I14).

The fear of isolation, however, is the more acute in Fil than in Fabia. The image that haunts Fil’s dream—the chilling image of a bottled, “newly born infant, with its position unchanged, cold and covering and afraid”—vividly conveys his anxiety (I44). In his nightmares he himself is that abandoned and quarantined infant, confined in a cold, narrow, and impersonal space.

This fear is born of years of loneliness in America. Unlike Fabia, Fil has no family. Because Filipinos were scarce in America and because anti-miscegenation laws at the time prohibited marriage between Filipinos and whites in many states, most old-timers remained bachelors. Such enforced bachelorhood seems especially unbearable to an ethnic group that takes pride and solace in the extended family, and especially in children.

The deprivation of children accounts in part for Fil’s inordinate excitement over the dancers. The idealized youths seem to symbolize what American society has denied the protagonist; having never experienced fatherhood, Fil wants to pamper the Filipino youths as though they were his own. The dancers elicit in him not only nostalgic but also paternal longings. As if to make up for the hospitality which he himself never received in America and to allay his thwarted parental instinct, Fil wants to show the Filipino dancers around, to invite them for dinner at his home, and to cook for them himself.

Much less enthusiastic, however, is Tony, Fil’s bedridden Filipino roommate who is dying of cancer. He argues with Fil:

“Ever since you heard of those dancers from the Philippines, you’ve been acting nuts. Loco. As if they’re coming here just for you.”

. . . . . . . . .

Fil said, “I know who’s nuts. It’s the sick guy with the sick thoughts. You don’t care for nothing but your pain, your imaginary pain.”

“You’re the imagining fellow. I got the real thing,” Tony shouted from the room. . . . There was a pain in his insides, like dull scissors scraping his intestines. Angrily, he added, “What for I got retired?”

“You’re old, man, old, that’s what, and sick, yes, but not cancer,” Fil said turning towards the snow-filled sky (I14-15).

Beneath the surface hostility, beneath the heated argument is Fil’s poignant inability to acknowledge Tony’s severe illness. Having no family, either in the Philippines or in America, Fil is afraid to lose his only friend. His family in the Philippines have all died, “quick death after a storm, or lingeringly, in a season of drought, all, all of them he had loved” (I15). Bereft of relatives, Fil has also been friendless in America for many years until he meets Tony, “whom he liked immediately and, in a way, worshipped, for all the things the man had which Fil knew he himself lacked” (I18). Tony is the better looking and more educated of the two. Fil is naive and ill-favored:

“Gosh, I wish I had your looks . . . . then I could face everyone of them [dancers],” he said, “but this mug.”

“That’s the important thing, your mug. It’s your calling card. It says, Filipino. Countryman,” Tony said.

“You’re not fooling me, friend,” Fil said. “This mug says, Ugly Filipino. It says, old-timer, muchacho. It says Pinoy, beijo” (I16).

Significantly, it is Tony who sees the warm-hearted countryman behind Fil’s ugly “mug,” who takes pride in their common ethnic origin notwithstanding Fil’s more advanced age. Because of his concern for Fil’s welfare, Tony refuses to play along with Fil’s great expectation. He admonishes Fil for his extravagance over the dancers:

“What for you want to spend? You’ve been living on loose change all your life and now on a treasury warrant so small and full of holes, still you want to spend for these dancing kids who don’t know you and won’t even send you a card afterwards.”

“Never mind the cards,” Fil answered. “Who wants cards? But don’t you see, they’ll be happy; and then, you know what? I’m going to keep their voices, their words and their singing and their laughter in my magic sound mirror.”

He had a portable tape recorder and a stack of recordings, patiently labeled, songs and speeches. The songs were in English, but most of the speeches were in the dialect, debates between him and Tony. It was evident Tony was the better speaker of the two in English, but in the dialect, Fil showed greater mastery . . . (I7).

Again the bickering carries an undertone of tenderness. Tony, who has witnessed Fil’s indigent days, cannot bear to see his friend lavish hard-earned money on the dancers; Fil, who so desires to record the voices of the newcomers, has recorded the familiar voices of the old-timers as well. Desirable as the dancers’ music may seem, we know that Fil cherishes his debates with Tony just as much—if not more. The friendship between Tony and Fil is intimate and inimitable paradoxically because it derives from an isolation shared between two old and lonely bachelors. Their loneliness cannot be known or dissipated by the young dancers from the Philippines.

When the time comes Fil fails to invite any of the dancers. Even though he has rehearsed many times what he wants to say, he feels tongue-tied amidst the young bodies.

Suddenly, he felt as if he was in the center of a group where he was not welcome. All the things he had been trying to hide now showed: the age in his face, his horry hands. He knew it the instant he wanted to shake hands with the first boy who had drawn close to him. . . . Fil put his hands in his pocket.

. . . . . . . . .

They were always moving away. As if by common consent, they had decided to avoid him, ignore his presence. Perhaps it was not their fault. They must have been instructed to do so. Or was it his looks that kept them away? The thought was a sharpness inside him (I20-21).

The meeting is a far cry from the one between Fabia and the visiting lecturer in “Scent.” Whereas Fabia is able to in-
vite the “first class Filipino” to his home for dinner, Fil can hardly talk to the dancers. Whereas Fabia confidently extends his hand to his guest before parting with him, Fil puts his hands in his pockets; acutely aware of his physical ugliness, Fil cannot make himself shake hands with the attractive youths. The dancers, in their turn, behave as the haughty folks in “Scent” who shun the Fabia’s shanty; they stay out of Fil’s way as if “by common consent”—the same phrase is used to describe the estrangement of Fabia’s neighbors.

Yet in both stories Santos stresses the inner grace of the old-timers despite the discrimination they face. Just as we share Roger’s perspective that Fabia is “a first class Filipino,” we feel that it is the ugly Fil who, unlike the supercilious dancers, possesses a generous soul, though his exciting plans of showing them around, of cooking them a delicious meal, never materialize.

Furthermore, both stories bring out the discrepancy between ideal and reality. Fabia loses himself in sweet reveries about the homeland even though he realizes that he was disowned by his family and that he would now be a stranger in the native village. Fil suffers a more abrupt disillusionment. He too comes to see the distance time has placed between himself and the sophisticated young dancers from the Philippines, the land he has idealized in his long sojourn in America. The youths whose arrival he has so fondly anticipated have little in common with him. Unlike Tony, the new arrivals see in Fil not the “Filipino, Countryman” but only the “Ugly Filipino.” They find the uneducated Pinoy awkward, embarrassing and, above all, far too old for their companionship. Their rejection creates a new loneliness in Fil, one that cuts more sharply than the loneliness of exile. It takes away the exile’s illusion of ever reconnecting with his countrymen and awakens him to the brute fact of his childlessness. Having fantasized how he will win the hearts of the new arrivals by bestowing on them the lavish hospitality of a countryman, Fil finds himself a stranger among his young compatriots. Wanting to embrace the young dancers as his surrogate children, he finds himself rejected as an antiquated specimen.

Nevertheless Fil still attends the dance performance and records it in his “magic sound mirror.” The recording is his last attempt at connecting with youth and with his native country. Had he been able to keep this recording, he could have visualized the next generation, evoked his homeland, relived the moments of festivity; in short, he could have kept indulging in happy dreams. But even this last effort at capturing a fond memory miscarries. The cassette that records the performance is accidentally erased during an emotionally charged conversation between Fil and Tony.

The circumstance under which Fil loses the recording (by mistakenly pushing the eraser) is his learning of another imminent loss. Tony, who went to see a doctor while Fil was at the performance, returns while Fil is listening to the cassette.

“Turn that thing off!” Tony’s voice was sharp above the echoes of the gongs and the applause settling into silence.

“Tony, what did the doctor say? What did he say?” [Fil] shouted and listened, holding his breath, no longer able to tell at the moment who had truly waited all day for the final sentence (126).

While very much an outsider among the dancers, Fil identifies with Tony to the extent of being unable to tell “who had truly waited all day for the final sentence.” For Tony it is a death sentence, though Fil still refuses to accept it:

“How you talk. In this country, there’s a cure for everything.”

“I guess we can’t complain. We had it good here all the time. Most of the time, anyway” (127).

Elsewhere Santos says of the old-timers, “Everybody knows them for what they are—players all in a waiting game they ultimately are bound to lose.” While death is not endemic to this group, their sense of ending is made the more desolate by their exile and, in most cases, by their enforced bachelordom. Without children, they cannot place their hope in posterity. Without family, they must spend their final moments alone—or with a caring compatriot.

Disillusioned by his encounter with the dancers, Fil senses that the dying Tony is his only kin—related by their common fate as expatriates. Looking back, Fil would probably agree with Tony that their time together has been the best of times. The wishful dreams about the homeland are mere escapes. Fil can no longer relate to the young people from the Philippines, a country drastically different from the one he left behind. Tony alone mitigates his loneliness in America and offers true comfort. Although Fil has lost his recording of the dance performance, and with that loss the memory of the Filipino dancers, it is the debates between Fil and Tony which remain on record: the memory of Tony will remain with Fil forever. The viable friendship between the two lonely bachelors outlasts visionary escapes.

Both stories describe closeness among the ostracized and visions amidst grim realities. Through these stories Santos conveys not only the old-timers’ capacity for love and friendship in a hostile environment but also the recurrent “illusions peculiar to exile.” The protagonist in each story seeks to escape from dreary routine and enforced isolation by indulging in wishful dreams, whether of Filipino women or of Filipino youths. Such castles in the air, however, often fall to the ground. Distant beauty may recede forever or disappear upon close examination; it is often a promise that remains unfulfilled. What emerges finally as most precious is not the illusive and elusive dream but the concrete, abiding presence—be it a fellow Filipino, a faithful spouse, or an adoring child—that softens harsh realities by allowing intimacy amidst pervasive loneliness.

Notes
1 Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1979). Subsequent page references to this book will be given in the text. The ten volumes include four novels (The Volcano, Villa Magdalena, The Preying Man, The Man Who [Thought He] Looked Like Robert Taylor), four short story collections (You Lonely People, Brother My Brother, The Day the Dancers Came, Dwell in the Wilderness) and two volumes of poetry (The Wounded Stag. Distances: In Time). Santos has received Guggenheim and Rockefeller fellowships and the Republic Cultural Heritage Award in Literature: Scent won the American Book Award in 1980. Heart thanks to Santos for sending me his vita.
Both Sides of the Mirror: 
Willa Cather’s “A Gold Slipper”
Alice Hall Petry

Any serious student of Willa Cather must inevitably be impressed that her short stories have received short shrift. What little criticism they have garnered is all too often distorted or simply incorrect. This phenomenon can be attributed, I believe, to a widespread tendency to approach Cather’s short fiction in a simplistic or reductive fashion: compared to, say, Faulkner, Cather has a direct style that often seems simple, plots that seem straightforward, and characters that seem virtual types; and thus too often the conclusion is drawn—even by the most sympathetic of Cather’s critics—that the stories themselves have little substance. Such has been the critical fate of “A Gold Slipper,” published in Harper’s in January of 1917 and collected in Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920). The first major critical biography of Cather handily dismisses the story with a reference to its “slight” core; and the usually perceptive David Daiches argues that the story “is contrived to point up the difference between the bourgeois way of life and that of the artist.”1 If “A Gold Slipper” were indeed simply a rendering of the perennial Philistine-versus-Artist theme, then perhaps it would merit the very little critical notice it has attracted; but in fact it is a complex and problematical story that seriously compromises the widespread assumption that Youth and the Bright Medusa was meant simply to show how “the passion of the artist to create” is thwarted by “a hostile and mercenary society.”2 As “A Gold Slipper” illustrates, Cather did not see the issue in such black-and-white terms.

“A Gold Slipper” presents a paradox. If one approaches the story with the myopic, preconceived notion that it simply shows how modern, mercenary society (represented by Pittsburgh coal baron Marshall McKann) is antithetical to art (represented by opera star Kitty Ayrshire), then one will tend to misinterpret the significance of the story’s structure, details, and predominant motifs: indeed, the very elements in the story which were meant to counter the simplistic Philistine-versus-Artist approach can readily be seen as reinforcing it. Consider the opening of “A Gold Slipper.” It begins in media res: “Marshall McKann followed his wife and her friend Mrs. Post down the aisle and up the steps to the stage of the Carnegie Music Hall with an ill-concealed feeling of grievance.”3 The first element to notice is that he “followed” his wife Bessie and her friend. This ostensibly macho Captain of Industry seems almost as ineffectual—as gilded, as it were—as is Don Hedger, literally on his knees watching the enthraling Eden Bower in “Coming, Aphrodite!” But McKann is not enslaved by passion: he is controlled by the social demands inherent in a marriage based upon economics (Bessie is “the daughter of an old Pittsburgh family as solid and well-rooted as the McKanns’”) [40]. Yet as becomes evident in the course of the story, he is more enslaved by what he incorrectly perceives as an irreconcilable personal situation: a successful businessman in a business-minded world, McKann also harbors a sincere love of art—a love he has deliberately failed to nurture properly over the years and which, as he approaches old age, he is coming to believe will probably never be revived. That “ill-concealed feeling of grievance” reflects not so much resentment towards his wife as it does dismay at having let a part of himself wither. And because it is Kitty Ayrshire who has triggered McKann’s painful reappraisal of himself, it is his distress over this reappraisal—rather than a contempt for music or a personal dislike for Kitty—which leads him to resist attending her concert at Carnegie Music Hall. Consider:

Heaven knew he never went to concerts, and to be mounted upon the stage in this fashion, as if he were a “highbrow” from Sewickley, or some unfortunate with a musical wife, was ludicrous. A man went to concerts when he was courting, while he was a junior partner [40].

Anyone who approaches “A Gold Slipper” under the assumption that it is simply a Philistine-versus-Artist fable will grossly misinterpret that passage. The argument that men attend concerts only while dating, or for the sake of their business advancement, is far more complex than it might appear. In part, it is a heartfelt, cynical statement by a man who truly loves music; nowhere does Cather state overtly that McKann hates music. “Heaven knew he never went to concerts” not because he dislikes them, but because he despises being in the same audience as pseudo-intellectuals and social climbers who pretend they love music. If anything, McKann is emphatically anti-Philistine. At the same time, the gruff resentment which McKann exudes over being at the hall is an act, a pose which he must assume as part of being a successful Pittsburgh coal baron. Regardless of his being anti-Philistine, the role of stereotypical businessman requires that he seem like a Philistine who has no time to waste on “impractical” matters like music. It is a false role he has been playing all his life, and it sounds convincing—so convincing, in fact, that Cather critics have taken this rhetoric at face