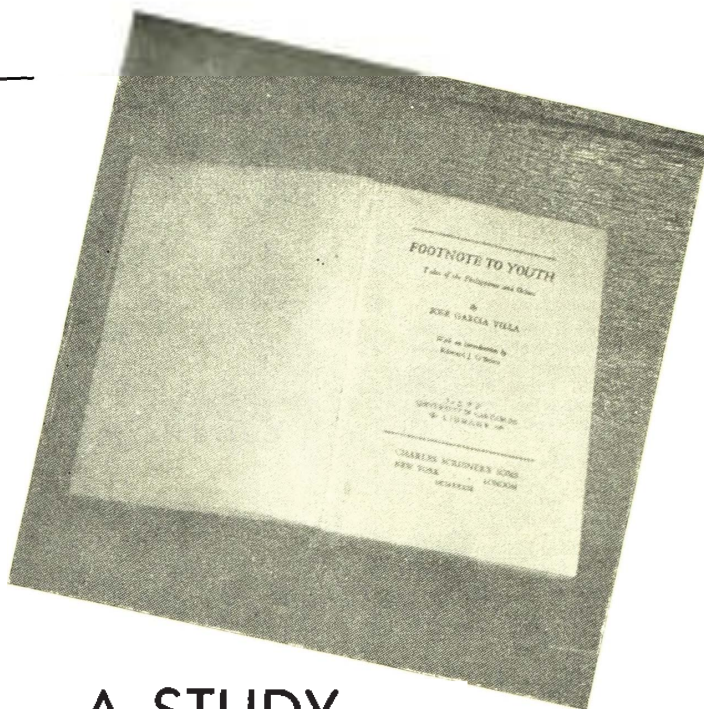


VILLA'S footnote to youth — A STUDY



FAME often tends to blur the true worth of an individual. Let's take Villa for instance. The continental acclaim he won in the United States might perhaps so dazzle some critics as to render a just and fair estimate of his achievement almost impossible. There is an aura of sacredness about him, artificially created, such as would scare away timid critics, from making adverse observations, lest unless he bows with the herd he be branded either as someone behind the times or even a literary ignoramus. The present writer however is making a gamble — with this study of Villa's volume, *Footnote to Youth*.

Whatever Villa may say about this book (he called it once puerile) I would still perhaps consider it as very much representative of him. Many in fact may even consider it as the summit of his literary career, his poetry and American critics notwithstanding. Yet reading through it, one is inevitably confronted with a painful conclusion: Villa is a literary freak. It is quite difficult to agree with Mr. O'Brien's observation in the Introduction that "the book places Villa among the half-dozen short-story writers in America who count." A typical jacket criticism no doubt. One however has to doff his hat to

Villa's mastery of technique, to the evocative sensuousness of his language, to the smooth lyrical quality of his prose, classically reticent and restrained in form — in short, to his perfect mastery of all the external features that make up great short stories.

The first story in the volume would easily stand out as an example. *Footnote to Youth* is presented in starkly naked prose, limpid nonetheless, and with a pained objectivity worthy of even a French master. Or what, for another instance, could be more hauntingly beautiful than *Kamya*. In flowing ecstatic language Villa has woven a tale of love, jealousy and death.

Gifted with sensitive descriptive powers, he harnesses all the reader's sense faculties and feasts them with sensuous details. In the opening paragraphs of *Footnote* he writes: "The ground was broken up into many fresh wounds and fragrant with a sweetish earthy smell. Many slender soft worms emerged from the furrows and then burrowed again deeper into the soil. A short colorless worm marched blindly to Dodong's foot and crawled clammy over it." The reader sees the ground, smells the earth, feels the clammy touch of the worm. More

can hardly be said.

Too, the flow of the story is smooth as the style, natural, almost to the point of naïveté, devoid of the strain so much a part of many a story of recent vintage. Despite, of course, the fact that the story covers three generations. Like a passing scene, the story presents no beginning and no end, but nevertheless it impresses the reader with a sense of finality effected not so much by the slice of experience it purports to present as by the meaning the author attaches to it and the form with which he convey it to the reader. *Death into Manhood* is much of the same pattern though there is a shift of point of view from that of a man's to that of a woman's.

The settings of the stories vary, the Philippines in some, America in others, though this hardly makes any difference at all, considering the universal themes of love, hatred, jealousy and human loneliness on which Villa constantly played; and he played on them to such a degree that setting has become a secondary consideration and hence practically of no moment whatsoever. For the stories could possibly happen anywhere to anybody, today yesterday or tomorrow.

One is almost tempted to wish

Literary features

literature were mere form or style or a mere presentation of reality. For indeed it is very regrettable to have to exclude a man of Villa's talent from the roster. Literature however is not a mere presentation, it is also an interpretation of reality. For much as a writer would aspire to objectivity, the subjective element, and of consequence, his vision of life, is ever unavoidable.

And here is where Villa falls short of the mark. In one sense it is not his fault, for Villa is as much a child of his age as any. With hardly a trace of the Filipino soul in him, was born of the birth-pangs of the modern spirit as individualized in the American spirit. The Filipino soul as such is still in its virginal stage, here and there succumbing

We live no doubt in an age of perplexity, an age perhaps more restless and harassed than any other. The old sign-posts (thanks to Science and its discoveries) have been torn down, and the modern man, rootless and lost, travels in a trackless waste. . . . But still there are, despite all this timeless patterns of experience, elemental realities at the center of all lives. The most outstanding discoveries of science have not altered the basic physiological and psychological processes of human experience. The artist has but to recognize this and with it the basis, to synthesize the conflicting patterns of his time to a meaningful and intelligible harmony. If the artist has no other function but to give expression to the confusion of

lonely man trying to find solace only within himself and his puffed-up genius. His fellowmen are the Ariels of his mind, his God is his ego. One cannot expect much of such a one. His poetry however is not our main concern. It is the **Footnote to Youth** on which the author wants to focus the reader's attention.

In this volume, Villa as in his poetry, created a world of unrelieved gloom where men are barred from one another by fences of their own making, living their lonely separate lives within the shells of their hatreds and jealousies and inner frustrations. He presents men, as in the story **The Fence** as "separate worlds, opposing planets so near together that their repulsion . . . become stifled and in its repres-

★ ★ ★ ★ by D. M. Maglalang ★ ★ ★ ★

to the modern temper, spasmodically, if not insincerely. Villa is an expatriate, from the spiritual point of view as well.

Having called Villa in the first paragraphs a freak, I would be much more just perhaps, were I to add that Villa is as much 'freak' as any of the so-called greats in American literature though not perhaps as voluminous or as outspoken, but nevertheless as astray. They all are of the same feathers. I would not wonder very much therefore if many of the critics in American letters were to give him ovations and applause considering the many other writers to whom they have given the very same ovations. Faulkner, who as yet has not proven himself worthy of the Nobel prize, continues to wallow in a riot of violence and horror for its own sake. Hemingway, but for his **Old Man and the Sea**, continues to study the mean struggles of mean souls. Caldwell of **Tobacco Road** and **God's Little Acre** notoriety continues to gloat over the meaninglessness and sordidness of life. If these be the prophets, the artists of whom American critics tell, then God pity us. Then indeed to Villa with his neurotics and themes of loneliness and futility finally belongs.

his age and to immortalize its chaos, then he may just as well rot in his grave.

Villa and company have been miserable failures in this respect. And yet we acclaim them. It is perhaps because we confuse their material with meaning, their technique with value, their eccentricity with originality. For they are not merely sensitive but neurotic, not merely troubled but jittery, not somber but morose. One must finally get sick of them as they bask in despicable self-pity, parading before men their private aches and woes.

In what specific sense then did Villa fail in his mission as an artist? If one were to peruse his poetry, one is confronted with a metaphysics as strange as it is absurd, with strange notions of God bordering at times on the tasteless and (forgive the word) even on the blasphemous. His poetry suffers from an undue straining for effects: a fault of the metaphysical poets. Occasionally however, like the latter, he strikes gold nuggets of brilliant images. On our part, however, we mix up his often silly excursions into the empyrean and incursions into the inner life of man as bold flights of imagination and his unintelligibility as poetic depth. His is the voice of a

sion become more envenomed."

His characters speak for his disenchantment. They ask questions and get no answers. "Why did life not fulfill all of youth's dreams?" so Dodong asks of himself. "Why must it be so? Why must one be forsaken after—Love?" Youth and love are not of the stuff of life. Youth is an illusion, life is a disillusionment, so Villa seems to imply. As once upon a time Dodong, young and loving, with no thought of the life after marriage, had asked his father's permission to marry, so was his own son young son asking him too the very same thing. "But he was helpless," so Villa writes. "He could not do anything. Youth must triumph . . . now. Love must triumph . . . now. Afterwards . . . it will be life. Dodong looked wistfully at his young son in the moonlight. He felt extremely sad and sorry for him."

This in essence is Villa's vision of reality. For him it is something oppressive, a dreary spectacle of pain and suffering without surcease. It is a monster with destructive fingers. "Teang loved Dodong . . . Dodong whom life had made ugly."

Must life indeed be ever the scapegoat of man's fumbling and blundering? Must life be held up always
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NEVER SAY GOODBYE

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fine." He was funny when he wasn't being funny and serious when he meant to be funny. Once, while we were writing a news report on the visit of a director of a mental institution, he pointed out the irony of launching a drive to help those unfortunates, when all the "mental cases" were right in the audience. Funny or not, we got the message all right. He was an exponent of the personal touch. He knew that no preaching can penetrate the proud shell of the blasé eighteen-year-old who can never be approached effectively except from his own level and by someone near to him. They say "in its innermost depths, youth is lonelier than old age." Perhaps that is why he succeeded where the others failed, because they have little sympathy for the twisting roads, the searching journey of many a pilgrim youth.

Whenever I met any of my classmates who knew him, we still talk about him as though he never really went away. If people really understand each other, they never say "goodbye" but that is hard to explain. We remember the things he said, the subtle humor uniquely his

own and our writings which he'd estimate for their mediocrity or hypocrisy. Good writing always stirred him yet stumbling undisciplined writing still interested him like nothing else could, for he was optimistic about the latent promise and inherent beauty in a piece of writing, in a confusion of seemingly sensible words strung together illogically but poignantly. The world of writing was his great passion, and it was in us, the young, that he hoped to fulfill many of his hopes.

We are still young and alive... still unsettled in our shaky ideals... with the years stretching out before us, awaiting the harvest of our gleanings, our contributions to life that will stamp us with our truest identity. He is gone, Connie, our friend, our confidante, our teacher. We are left... the promises still left to be seen... the seeds groping for life and purpose and their own souls. We are still here, we are not dead and we are the promises, the seeds. He left us a very big order to finish... and it staggers our minds knowing how important it must be to him that we must carry on... #

ONCE I HAD A TEACHER

(Continued from page 9)

eyes to beauty. He had special talent for uncovering to us the beauty of nature and the beauty of the printed word. He rhapsodized over the incomparable colors of the sunset, the matchless brilliance of the moonlight. We learned that beauty was everywhere but that it was the reward of the man who painstakingly searched for it. He recounted to us how once he woke up at dawn to steep himself in the beauty of a sleeping city as he walked through the empty streets. The poet in him occasionally had to burst out in exclamations of undisguised admiration of some new beauty or some rediscovered old one. He read poems in our literature class without the afflicted pose of the reader aware of the effect he is producing on his

audience, but with the easy naturalness of a true lover of poetry. He encourage us to commit beautiful lines to memory by quoting them himself. "Ah," he would say, "I know not what soft incense hangs upon the boughs" when some delightful fragrance filled the air.

Such was the teacher Faigao.

With his characteristic humility, he told me, two months before he died, "I'm afraid, when I have to go, my hands will be empty."

What I would have given just to have seen the look on his face when another Teacher bade him welcome with the words, "For he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." #

VILLA'S FOOTNOTE . . .

(Continued from page 3)

as an impersonal force, relentless and powerful to which men are but as pawns? Must one feel extremely sad and sorry for him who wants to be young, who wants to love and to live? Life is ceaseless suffering, Villa wails. Or else a terribly grim joke. In the story *The Fence*, the notes of the girl's guitar floated in the moonlight... too late. And when Aling Biang announced "The Lord is born" on Christmas midnight to her son Iking, Iking died.

While Villa glories in the songs of the wind, the songs of the young lush moon, the songs of the tall strong trees, he nevertheless opens his story *Malakas* with a sigh "Hail". And in the same breath he says: "What is alive, hurts."

Kamya, for all its sensuous beauty, *Given Woman*, *Resurrection* harp on the same theme of futility. The symbols are empty. The characters are either draped in black or wrapped in mists — but still one can see right through them. They are all sick with neurosis.

Reading the volume is no doubt an experience, though hardly enriching. The experience palls, almost harrows. One seems to live in a vague misty world where reality though as hazy as a dream is nevertheless as overpowering as the heavy smell of faded or fading flowers, a chill comfortless world pervaded with a withering sense of solitariness where one meets lonely people of only two dimensions, disillusioned searchers, desolate figures wrapped in uncertain light like faces in some impressionistic painting.

As one closes the book it is inevitably with a sigh and with regret. Villa is not what he ought to be or what he might be, so we think. His rebellion is too obvious, his anger too made up, and one immediately thinks of a poseur. His pride is arrogance. His obsession with impotence and frustration chorused by heavenly mockery and keyed by human loneliness indubitably harrows his art. If he could but bend his will... now. If he could but grasp the essence of the Christian spirit... now. And not just the veneer. But he glories in his loneliness. So he writes in *Walk at Midnight*, "I had no playmates. I swam no river. I climbed no trees. I was alone."

Where are the playmates of him who is alive only to himself? Deserts have no rivers and trees.

Villa is indeed alone. #