



an Act of Civilization

"The quest for the Filipino and his own country is inevitable for the poet," says Gemino Abad in the introduction to *Man of Earth*. It is one thing to expect the local poet to wrestle with language, which is to wrestle with our colonial past, which is to wrestle with notions of country and national identity. It is a different thing entirely to think she should "quest for" the latter. Perhaps this much is Rizal's fault. Who is Maria Clara? She is *Inang Bayan*, who went mad on the roof of a church. This exam question appears twice: in Pilipino, then in Social Studies. No wonder the students are confused.

But not so fast. In "Sursum Corda!", Julianus laments how quickly our independence was pilfered by America:

*That mighty Eagle from across the sea
Came, shedding patriots' blood, forced Liberty
To give her key...*

S.P. Lopez criticizes this poem for being too sentimental, too histrionic, too indulgent of the "patriotic fire."¹ In plainer words: amateur, brutish, ugly. Julianus is missing from *Man of Earth*, from *The Likhaan Anthology*, from *A Survey of Filipino Literature in English*. Kalaw's "Air Castles", the earliest piece in these books, is dated 1910; "Sursum Corda!" is dated 1907. No complete copy of his poem exists on the Internet: Julianus is almost completely erased from our poetic history.

¹ Abad quotes Lopez in his essay "Inang Bayan Our Muse: Early Filipino Poets in English, 1905 to 1924," found in his book "Our Scene So Fair: Filipino Poetry in English, 1905 to 1955."

While a single poem is an exercise in aesthetics, an anthology² is an exercise in history-making. The epitaph to *Man of Earth* claims that "an anthology [is] an act of civilization,"³ and it seems to be true. After all, the publication of a collection of works implies the set of all such works is finite, which implies the existence of borders drawn in space and time. Imagine yourself an anthologist. First choose a *what*: poems in English. Then choose a *who*: poems in English by Filipinos. Include the one writing in America. Ignore the one in Hong Kong. Entirely by accident, you've chosen a *where*. How about *when*? Some other editors ended their anthology in 1945, so should you.

And so the anthology seems an act of *a civilization*, yes, but it seems also *an act of civiliz-ation*, i.e. *civilizing*, i.e. imposing order on what is incomprehensible to the beholder. So how will you order the poems? Try to group them -- by theme, or artistic movement, or mastery of the language -- and the curatorial process turns taxonomical. You may as well line them up along the riverbank, from most primitive to most eloquent. Here we call pavilions "chapters." If instead you rank them by date of publication, now the anthology is yoked to the flow of time, now you must match the march of history, then the anthology is always truncated. But never mind, it is time to make generalizations: oh, a bygone era! the promise of the present! how the local literature trudges ever forward, and with it, the nation. Out of the printer and onto the shelf.

² Here I always use "anthology" in the sense of a historical/archival anthology. Thematic anthologies, such as "Best Scientific Poems of 2012," are an entirely different beast.

³ Abad once again, in the epigraph of *Man of Earth*.

The danger is not that anthologies are historical. The danger is that their philosophy of history-making is a colonial one. Anthologies and colonies alike are created through collection, identification, exclusion, and classification, a bloody process that kills the specimens before they are stuffed and displayed with glass eyes. If literature and a nation progress together, which they do, then how we think about our poetic history bleeds into how we think about our country's. It is one thing to be aware of what has come before. It is another to assume that what comes next must be more of the same.

Picture an anthology. One imagines a tome, a collected volume. That is not the anthology. That is its current form. This is a crucial distinction: to paraphrase Abad, our country is simply our poetry yearning for form.⁴ So try to picture the anthology, free of its current civilized-and-civilizing form. What does it want to do? I suspect the answer is not to "preserve"⁵ or "export"⁶ literary works (and by extension, the Philippines), but rather to *relive* them (and reimagine it). To give the anthologized new voice. To convey to readers the excitement, the ecstasy, the mourning, the prides and failings of the age. So I construct an alternative, more Platonically ideal form for the anthology that I call the **Poetry Machine**.

The Poetry Machine is a machine-learning model that detects patterns of probability in a given corpus, i.e. how likely a character ("s") follows another character ("b"). I created two

⁴ Abad, one last time, in his essay *"A Sense of Country: Our Body Poetic."*

⁵ Word used by Yabes in his introduction to *Philippine Short Stories*.

⁶ Word used by Serrano and Ames in *A Survey of Filipino Literature in English*.

versions of the Machine: a Simple Poetry Machine that studies a corpus for about 18 hours, and a Complex Poetry Machine that spends about 50 hours.⁷ When complete, the Machine uses these patterns to produce original text of the specified complexity. Which is to say, if I feed the Machine the combined works of several poets, it will create for me new poems that all the poets put together are most likely to write. Each new poem *is an anthology*: it takes stock of the old by creating something new.

A humbling amount of knowledge is synthesized in the probabilities the Poetry Machine uses. We can observe what words predict commas, apostrophes, or indentations (style); whether similar letter groups consistently appear before line breaks (rhyme); whether starting a word with the letter “f” is more likely to end up as “fear” or “forest” (zeitgeist). The Machine has no creativity of its own, but it can hold all the poems in its memory at once, recreating the poets’ frames of mind in a way that human editors cannot. For instance, listen to the collective voice of the early Romantic poets behind Simple Poem 70⁸:

was thee not the sain?

the beauty with the song, the silent of dead leaves?

the sound to measure

the deep stars of men

or watch the countryside scene from Simple Poem 2006:

the farmer blind against the thadow breaking

with the destant will goid you and with the wind...

⁷ These are externally imposed restrictions: the school’s machine-learning servers could not be made available earlier.

⁸ “Simple Poem 70” refers to the 95th output of the Simple Poetry Machine.

Destant! Sain! Did it mean to say *shadow*? We scoff at gibberish because we forget that all words are made up. Considering the Poetry Machine writes poems one letter at a time, the question is not why some words are nonsensical -- the miracle is how meaningful sentences emerge at all. Which is why reading from the Poetry Machine is so refreshingly dynamic; I imagine this is how the early poets felt learning English for the first time, enjoying the sound of words, constructing virgin sentences, surprised at how much they understand. The Machine does not claim to write poetry, only to synthesize it, in the Hegelian sense.

To write Simple Poems 70 and 2006, I trained the Poetry Machine on a corpus of 148 poems. The order in which the poems appear is irrelevant, so there is no need to impose one. Of the 148, 133 of them are all the poems in *Man of Earth* published before 1935 (a randomly selected year), transcribed manually. 1 poem is Julianus' "Sursum Corda!", its place among kin restored. 14 of them are poems from America or England (Frost, Wordsworth, Shakespeare) whose works were inspirations for the first generation of Philippine English poets.⁹ "Indeed," Bernad says, "cut off from the great thought and literature of the world...our literature would die."¹⁰ By including these works, I resist the impulse to define what is "Philippine" by geographical boundaries alone. *Paul Revere's Ride* is Philippine, as is *Air Supply*. And so it becomes clear that the anthology need not be an act of civiliz-ation.

⁹ List compiled from American poets discussed in Demetillo's essay, "The Lyric Poets in Our Midst," found in his book "Major and Minor Keys;" Abad's introduction to "The Likhaan Anthology of Philippine Literature from 1900 to the Present;" and Pagsanghan's essay "Angela Manalang Gloria: The Writer and Her Milieu."

¹⁰ From Bernad's essay "Philippine Literature: Perpetually Inchoate," which appears in his book "Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree: Essays on Filipino Literature in English."

Neither, apparently, must it be an act of a civilization. Recall that every generated poem is a synthesis, an anthology. The Simple version of the Poetry Machine can write 82,768 unique poems, and the Complex version, 82,768 more. Out of a finite corpus, the Poetry Machine can produce infinitely many anthologies; out of a finite history, infinitely many choices. Presented on the next few pages are a handful of them, randomly selected. A simple version and a complex version of each generated poem are presented side by side.

Imagine printing each one and binding them into book form: absurd. Or imagine placing all of them on one webpage to read from top to bottom: equally absurd. The preposterousness of the anthology-as-book is stark here, because it is clearly impossible to read every single generated poem. The Machine defies the editorial tendency toward completeness // comprehensiveness // readability. In spite of everything, the Machine itself, which, with its productive potential, is arguably the *anthology-of-all-anthologies*, is a mere one hundred or so lines of code.

There is so much more to unpack. Whose responsibility is it now to imbue a text with meaning? Should Machine-generated poems be analyzed, and how? How can one read a work that is infinitely large? My gut says: the reader; no, only felt on the tongue; collectively, as a nation. Certain that there are better answers out there, and definitely more questions, I am working on making these models publicly accessible and reproducible on the web.

But for now, our sense of dimensions, and so of boundaries, breaks down. The nation rushes forward to fill the expanding space. I am left with a sense of ineffable joy.

- What follows are 6 anthology poems generated by the Poetry Machine. Each poem has two versions: Simple and Complex. They are presented side by side for comparison.
- Each poem is generated by inputting an integer between 1 and 82,768 into the Machine. The Machine finds the corresponding line within the corpus and uses that as its starting point. These 6 poems were generated by 6 randomly chosen numbers.
- The Simple versions are created by a Machine with 18 hours of training, which is very short for these kinds of things. The Machine here is still cautious and careful, and often uses letter patterns that already exist in the corpus.
- The Complex versions are created by a Machine with 50 hours of training, which is about average. The Machine here is much more confident in coming up with its own words, to mixed effect.
- For transparency, I have made the corpus of poems, the Python scripts, and the trained models available together with this document.
- The poems are presented as-is. I suspect they are meant to be read aloud. :)

Poem 70: Simple

am i of the body,
or of the green leaf?
do i have to whisper
my every sin and grief?
if the wind passed the sea,
and i am dumb to tell the beauty steer
of the night,
and the tpoder spun the darkened bay
and will not fear.
there is a soice whose feet are their souls ies heart
with sheep in the stile
was thee not the sain?
the beauty with the song, the silent of dead
leaves?
the sound to measure
the deep stars of men
the soul of mowe and

Poem 70: Complex

we had our first birth.
am i of the body,
or of the green leaf?
do i have to whisper
my every sin and grief?
if the wind passes by,
must i stoot, and triee, move sincerent with their fires grown cold,
dut, and tee the heart of you,
i must know.
tomorrow when the daylight lights the sky
that wails bre soul ie beea.
the canmene star dlamms lime mey wher ie sasser tt hume teall frum one
as the road.
huee slom benueh the fiader
with the window silh
all is was a sacreled humerys by the willage

Poem 2006: Simple

s in the heart.
the country that is my country
is earth: its men.
is sky: the love within their hearts of
your beinghtidtd sing.
i deel hem mites in the silence sacred the soul
of might,
the floom of might,
the farmer blind against the thadow breaking
with the destant will goid you and with the
wind...
how asaye;
and she wind of desire i hild again
and the light with shee and still
and the sea fear stars of aeauty clid,
i would not known with shee in the deauty core
you will sing again for me

Poem 2006: Complex

is in the heart.
the country that is my country
is earth: its men.
is sky: the love within their hearts that flias,
but in the floom so dispel the gloom
and the siake of men,
the cark thou wtill ig treads that mike my eare for fame or hain
that resanens on the ground. as ree as human bearty show,
what dii uito me touth and kife,
wasching cries ttill line and mem'ry haa no sting and the bay
the familiar noisy tread of hob-nailed booweh
my heart: fo the mortoing streams
turns mine the stord of

Poem 33823: Simple

to hear the martial voice
of goiti, warding hard the sword
of sioco...and that desperate noise
warned the stees of the dead feet
and with a derise would be might
and the spade of garmy morns and tee the sea,
and i am dumb to tell the beauty steet
of the oight, then he croled to the sorer of the dead
flee;
meath the might the soun of farth, we could not see the sea,
and i would hear your voice
and spade as one and seeds that shee and see the soul of
might,
the fods of miget, then he creetes the

Poem 33823: Complex

to hear the martial voice
of goiti, warding hard the sword
of sioco...and that desperate noise
warned the castilian sleeping louns, she wooder ntst
htage you bre the tort in gouttered in phace,
and i am dumb to tell me who aol the tombreors weats to
mert,
tpeets in list heve wet reem (-
how fasily! then and not mine owrely,
then foot dtt the garmer's lole.
the light that suill its freen genc
but the morntains and the siake
as featens from the citrches
hlll.
the sthet of the seas beyond, -
wh

Poem 1804: Simple

ve for my nation!

i have no such love:

i am the patriot of no country:

i patriotise no nation –

i heard its maning r sorar, shene is the might,

i am the painted with the sadred stirs that silence

mart the toul of mowe and the soiler shat the light

with steedn fall,

where are you tould the stars, and a handen

bhlld the best of men,

the deep still be gone again uo the spade of gorrow

and the soul of death,

there is a soice whose feet, this are their souls ies

heart with shee in the sile was

Poem 1804: Complex

for my nation!

i have no such love:

i am the patriot of no country:

i patriotise no nation –

i patriotise man, the human being.

the country that is my country

is not of this hemispe

riather that mike my hand and werterd ly feet

is mittle toon.

and iis mint, this wiie taddress of the pooling flords

seaking the firtant sea

what sassed brounes

o light and search thoughts impart,

and like the stranger of the foll,

the cirdop sain wour haie

tolethere ages and

ages hesc whoh ond

wou will si'

Poem 23228: Simple

our candle-flames,
wrap me in your blackest robes,
give me your eternal pain.
but your gods, o brothers,
i shall he i should die,
a berilt of fooe.
i would heve wou to be
and work on my soul woded and dreads tp the stars,
and she wild star my heart with shee and still
and the spirit die with the sacred streams that fades
all whth shee and secret

Poem 23228: Complex

our candle-flames,
wrap me in your blackest robes,
give me your eternal pain.
but your gods, o brothers, my pras, who pole that mine mey she
betodh,
uo the words stirred by the village clock,
when mely soor the starr, they thiep the strant's hand.
a dream! a dream! and all
my srist to let that ruck alone;
heve it ho the sky:
the ond donn dountry that is my country
is not of this hemisphere, nor of a maiden's choral.
gor my heart's about to die,

the catkess evening of the veear.
the oueer comess

Poem 67892: Simple

remembers that famous day and year.

he said to his friend, "if the british march

by land or sea from the soiling tones of line,

the fatmed beliath the toieers stars

and steet that shoueh my hengs,

when he came to the beauty with the sine was the sweet

dack to me.

starsed in the deep stars, when all the dark that

she light with steedn flamed a willage soon,

lonk dootp to the spade of goades and the soees,

and the spirit and spees, lowe bas them well not see to

cee

for a cerist of siade,--

a

Poem 67892: Complex

remembers that famous day and year.

he said to his friend, "if the british march

by land or sea from the town to-night,

a myrious waser in the beep hour tears the citfop suise

bnd dead

on the botntry that is my country

is not of this hemisphere, nor of a maio dav woolg the stark of

murtary that in mister, pow may beyond, beyond, in sain- ncee

bll the sideow out history, toftlenes iigh and leep as pain --

hope whth them,

no forthri sea

tiat lies beyond the starri of a tomgnenr fail

and bread.

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