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REVISITING THE GOLDEN AGE OF FIL-HISPANIC LITERATURE (1898–1941)

Literary histories, written both in Spanish and English, put the American colonial period (1898–1941) as the Golden Age of Fil-hispanic Literature. It is an assessment which has, by large, gone unquestioned. The paper examines the reasons behind this assessment and problematizes its relevance.

A Brief Survey of Fil-hispanic Literature during its Golden Age

When the Philippine-American War (1899–1902) ended, little did the period's leading Filipino writers in Spanish realize that a new war had just begun. The conflict they just fought, better known as the Philippine Insurrection in American historiography, led to a cultural upheaval which presented the Fil-hispanic literati — most of them staff members of *La Independencia*, the organ of the then nascent republic led by Emilio Aguinaldo (1869–1964) — an unexpected challenge.

In the beginning of the U.S. colonial period, the leading writers of the revolution — poets Fernando Ma. Guerrero (1878–1929), Cecilio Apóstol (1877–1938), and Jose Palma (1876–1903), and journalist Rafael Palma (1874–1939) — would be joined by younger colleagues: poets novelist Jesus Balmori (1887–1948) and poet Manuel Bernabe (1890–1960), and poet-dramatist-essayist Claro Recto (1890–1960).

Much later, the group would grow bigger with the inclusion of those from the generation born during the American period: novelist Antonio Abad (1899–1970), essayist and poet Enrique Fernandez Lumba (1899–1990), poet and fictionist Evangelina Guerrero Zacarias (1904–1949), fictionist Enrique Laygo (1897–1932), poet Flavio Zaragoza Cano (1892–1994) and essayists Teodoro Kalaw (1884–1940) and Jaime de Veyra (1873–1963).

These old and young writers would produce a rich harvest of literary titles.

Among novelists, Abad would stand out as the undisputed leader. Three of his four novels — “El Último Romántico” [Abad 1927] (“The Last Romantic”), “La Oveja de Nathan” [Abad 1928] (“Nathan’s Sheep”), “El Campeón” [Abad 1939] (“The Champion”) — would all win literary awards. Two decades after the gold age ended, he published his last novel, “La Vida Secreta de Daniel Espeña” [Abad 1960] (“The Secret Life of Daniel Espeña”), would be a finalist in a literary contest in Spain [Mariñas 1974].

Coming at close second was Jesus Balmori, who would come out with two novels detailing the “morality sins” of the Spanish-speaking urban middle class, “Bancarrotta de Almas” [Baltori 1910] (“Bankruptcy of the Soul”) and “Se Deshojó la Flor” [Baltori 1915] (“The Flower Has Lost Its Petals”). These two oeuvres critiqued the effects of a slowly-Americanizing elite, exemplified by the fates of their lead female protagonists who would explore the newly-opened social spaces created by “Americanization.” Balmori’s third novel, “Los Pájaros de Fuego” [Baltori 1945] (“The Birds of Fire”) would come three decades later, a fictional representation of World War II Philippines.

Theater genre, one of two genres which played an important role in the Spanish-speaking native elite’s social life, would be best remembered for two works of a young Recto: “Sólo Entre las Sombras” [Recto 1917] (“Alone in the Dark”) and “La Ruta a Damasco” [Recto 1918] (“The Road to Damascus”). Like Balmori’s first two novels, they hinted at the negative effects of “Americanization” even as they portrayed the male *ilustrados* of the time as the patriots defending Filipinas, the Madre Patria, which was then struggling to attain self-determination. After the controversial Recto, Abad would be considered second in the pantheon of pre-war playwrights.

Poetry would be the second genre which became part of the elite’s social life. In a time given before television and internet-based entertainment, literary-musical programs staged in public functions or parties held in the homes of the rich, poetry was recited by señoritas and eloquent-sounding señores. Most of the poems which appear in Recto’s “Bajo los Cocoteros” [Recto 1911] (“Under the Coconut

Trees”), his sole poetry anthology, are dedicated to certain *ilustrado* individuals and recited during those cultural programs.

While Fernando Ma. Guerrero would be held as the El Maestro, the dean of Fil-hispanic poets, and his anthology “Crisálidas” [Guerrero 1914 (“Chrysalis”)] would be held in admiration for the way it showcased his mastery of poetic composition norms of the period, Recto’s “Bajo los Cocoteros” and Apóstol’s posthumous “Pentélicas” (1941) [Apóstol 1950] would likewise meet with critical acclaim. But the highest honor should probably go to Balmori and Bernabé.

Balmori, who published his first poetry anthology, “Rimas Malayas” [Baltori 1904] (“Malay Verses”) during his late teens, amazed the Fil-hispanic literary world with a “grand slam” in 1908 when he won all three prizes — first, second, and third — in a poetry contest organized by the nationalist newspaper “El Renacimiento” in commemoration of the death of Jose Rizal (1861–1896), the national hero. In 1928, he would publish “El Libro de Mis Vidas Manileñas” [Baltori 1928] (“The Book of My Life in Manila”), an anthology of his collection of satirical verses which appeared in his newspaper column “Vidas Manileñas”.

But Balmori’s crowning achievement as poet would be his triumph in the 1940 Commonwealth Literary Contests, where his “Mi Casa de Nipa” [Baltori 1941] (“My Nipa Hut”) would win first place in the Spanish language category.

Bernabé first won the Premio Zobel — the highest literary award for a Fil-hispanic writer created in 1920 — in 1924 for his Spanish translation of Omar Khayyam’s Rubaiyat. Two years later, he shared the prize with Balmori for their poetic jousts called Balagtasan, named after a leading 19th century Tagalog poet, Francisco Balagtas.

To Bernabé would go the record for the thickest poetry anthology ever produced in Fil-hispanic literature, the 330-page “Cantos del Trópico” [Bernabé 1929] (“Songs from the Tropics”). It is a volume which carried several poems which celebrate Madre España, the figure of Spain as his generation’s cultural mother, defend the Spanish language as Philippine cultural patrimony, and affirm the Fil-hispanic identity of Filipinas.

Laygo, despite an early death, would be considered as an important short story writer. Among the period’s few women writers, Evangelina

Guerrero-Zacarías, the champion of the sentimental genre *prosa lírica*, for which she would share the 1935 Premio Zóbel with Jose Reyes, would stand out as the best. Except for a few titles, her stories remain unpublished, despite retrieval from microfilmed copies of pre-war periodicals.

The essay would have as champions the likes of Recto, Fernández Lumba, de Veyra, and Kalaw. Notable published compilations would include Recto's "Monroísmo Asiático" [Recto 1929] ("Asian Monroeism"), and Teodoro Kalaw's "Dietario Espiritual: 1926–1927" [Kalaw 1930] ("Spiritual Sustenance: 1926–1927"). Fernández Lumba and de Veyra, whose works appeared in periodicals, would wait until years after the end of World War II before coming out with their own book anthologies. Fernández Lumba published his 1955-winning Premio Zóbel entry, "Hispanofilia Filipina" ("Philippine Hispanophilia") in 1984 [Lumba 1984]. De Veyra's "Hispanidad en Filipinas" ("Hispanidad in the Philippines"), finished in 1940, was published in 1961 in Madrid [De Veyra 1961].

The abovementioned writers constitute the better known personalities in the Fil-hispanic canon. But for each name, several others are left unmentioned. By the end of 1941 when the Japanese invasion would usher in a new era in Philippine literature in Spanish, there would be dozens of names of Fil-hispanic writers to be found in the different literary histories [Alinea 1964; Brillantes 2006; Mariñas 1974].

But there was one sad realization pre-war Fil-hispanic writers had to accept: while they lived the years of the "golden age," it was also the time that saw the emergence of a new generation, which was, unlike their elders, an English-speaking crop. That meant the loss of an audience.

Why Was the American Colonial Period Fil-hispanic Literature's Golden Age?

What made the American colonial period (1898–1941) the golden age of Fil-hispanic literature? For the answers, we turn to literary histories. In what is a sad commentary on Filipino academics' neglect of Fil-hispanic literary studies, principally due to the language barrier, only two titles have been the sources of information on Fil-hispanic

literature until 2000: writer Estanislao Alinea's "Historia Analítica de la Literatura Hispanofilipina (Desde 1566 Hasta Mediados de 1964)" [Alinea 1964] and Spanish diplomat-turned-literary-historian Luis Mariñas' "La Literatura Filipina en Castellano" [Mariñas 1974]. The first is literary history for Spanish-reading Filipinos; the latter is for Spaniards curious about Filipiniana letters in Spanish.

For almost three decades, scholars of Fil-hispanic literature had to work with Alinea and Mariñas' narratives. In 2000, a new narrative would come out courtesy of Lourdes Brillantes, a retired U.P. professor of Spanish and Premio Zóbel winner for 1998. Her "80 Años del Premio Zóbel" is a history of the literary award [Brillantes 2000]. A Spanish version, but an expanded one, appeared in 2006, "81 Years of the Premio Zóbel" [Brillantes 2006]. Unfortunately, with the award now defunct, Brillantes' works can be read as its Requiems, attempts to document a little-known institution's eight decades of existence.

From Alinea, to Mariñas, then to Brillantes, there is one explanation given for the designation of the years 1898–1941 as Fil-hispanic letters' golden age: the rich volume of literary output produced. Three main reasons have been advanced for this development: a) the relative (compared to the Spanish era) freedom of expression during the American period; b) the publication venues provided by the various Spanish language periodicals and English language periodicals with Spanish sections; and c) the presence of the Premio Zóbel.

Fil-hispanic literary scholarship in recent years has also cast light on the discourse of the writers of the period. While early works focused on the ideological dilemma of cultural re-engineering — the "Americanization" of Hispanized Philippine society — even as they also played on the theme of self-determination and independence aspirations, one critic [Imson 1991] would point out that the output of the peacetime (the colloquial Tagalog term used to describe the pre-war period) generation responded to what can be considered as its "cultural code."

This "cultural code" would emphasize the defense of things Fil-hispanic (read: Hispanic elements which have penetrated the Filipino cultural psyche and which have since been appropriated as "Filipino" since 1898) in Philippine society. At the core of this "Fil-hispanicness" is the possession of the Spanish language.

This advocacy for the Spanish language — and by extension, Hispanic culture in the Philippines — as Filipino cultural patrimony explains the pro-Spanish stance taken by Fil-hispanic literati in their writings, an attitude which another generation of Filipino intelligentsia, now solely English-speaking would dismiss as nostalgia for a colonial past.

For the era's Fil-hispanic writers, they were defending Philippine culture. It was a mere accident of history that their intellectual development would be conducted in Spanish. They should not be faulted for expressing themselves in their language of training, the same way as the generations which succeeded them, at least until the 1960s, did so in English.

Indeed, it is a loss to the present-day generation that due to the American interruption of the historical process, resulting in the spread of English rather than Spanish among the population, post-Cory Aquino-born Filipinos (half of the population is aged 15 years and below, or born after 1994) cannot discover first hand — linguistically, that is — how peacetime Fil-hispanic writers critiqued American ideological indoctrination; glorified personalities enshrined in the Philippine pantheon of heroes, especially Rizal; affirmed Philippine cultural identity by inscribing the country as both *Malakas* and *Maganda* (“Strong” and “Beautiful”), the country's mythological ancestors. In short, how despite writing in Spanish, they wrote about being Filipinos.

Had no American intervention come in 1898 and in the years that followed, the Philippines would have gone the same course taken by former Latin American colonies of Spain: with a Spanish-speaking native elite, the first post-revolution generations would be the ones institutionalizing the spread of Spanish in the archipelago, looking at it as the lingua franca that would unite the people coming from several ethno-linguistic groupings, building an educational system which would teach Spanish and erecting socio-political structures which would retain

Spanish as the language of power and prestige.

What the Americans made English do during what is popularly referred to as the Philippines' “fifty years in Hollywood” after “300 years in the convent,” the predominantly-Spanish speaking intelligentsia of 1898 would have had Spanish do.

This situation is directly connected to this present revisiting of the years 1898–1941 as the “Golden Age” of Fil-hispanic literature. For those of the current generation studying Philippine literature who are lucky to touch on Philippine letters in Spanish, the denomination of “Golden Age” for this period only comes across as a historical abstraction. Personally for them, there is nothing “golden” to the period except for its label.

Fil-hispanic Literary Studies in the 21st Century

An examination of Philippine literature textbooks will show the marginalization of the study of Fil-hispanic letters. There are hardly any references to the literary output, except for the leading writers — Guerrero, Apóstol, Bernabé, Balmori, and Recto — and not all of them are not usually mentioned all the time. Rizal’s novels and works — whose study is ordained by a law promulgated half a century ago by no less than Recto, by then already transformed into one of the country’s leading politicians — are the only ones easily accessed by the present generation, even albeit in translations.

The marginalization thus occurs at two levels: inside Philippine literature classrooms, because the focus is more on Rizal; and in the scholarly literature, because there are less and less Filipino academics literate in Spanish and working on Fil-hispanic letters. The result is the teaching of Philippine literature as if only a scarce output in Spanish had been produced, and most of them only up to 1898; and the continued absence of the literary production in Spanish in the overall valuation of Philippine letters.

Since 1987, when the legislative-mandated compulsory study of Fil-hispanic literature was abolished, Philippine writings in Spanish are now mainly studied only by graduate students who choose Fil-hispanic letters as their area of specialization. The absence of a Spanish-reading public has not encouraged the reprinting of the works in their original version. Except for a very small number, Fil-hispanic writings can now be classified as rare books. Only Recto — whose family has established a foundation which collected and published his writings in nine volumes in 1990, the year of his birth centenary — enjoys the special privilege of having his works available to the serious researcher.

How is this situation to be resolved? The same way the problematic situation was created: lifting the linguistic barrier while preserving the original works for the enjoyment and appreciation of future Filipino hispanoparlantes.

Beginning with the present-day generation, efforts should be made to preserve original texts for posterity. At the same time, these texts should be translated into the language(s) of training of the current and future crops of intelligentsia: in Filipino and in the other regional languages.

Only by doing so can an earnest study and valuation of the Fil-hispanic literary output be done. Only by making the original works linguistically accessible to current and future generations can the scholarship on Fil-hispanic literature be fully integrated with mainstream Philippine literature. Translations have indeed been made [Cuentos 1987; Philippine 1989; The Other 2002] but they constitute, at best, sporadic attempts which are not sustained for a length of time.

While Recto may rage in his grave about having Filipinos read his and his colleagues' works in translation, a compromise has to be done: better translated and read, than linguistically untouched and forgotten. Recto himself, being the champion of the Rizal Law — which allowed generations of Filipino students to be familiar with the national hero's literary output--would understand.

Hopefully, in the next few decades, the label "Golden Age" to refer to the period 1898–1941 for Fil-hispanic letters would be a designation Filipinos would have as a lived experience, having read, accessed, and critiqued the literary output.

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