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**Rereading Past Writ:
Toward a History of Filipino Poetry
from English, 1905 to the Mid-50's**

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**Rereading Past Writ:
Toward a History of Filipino Poetry
from English, 1905 to the Mid-50s**

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It seems best, at the outset, to risk a summary statement of our critical standpoint, for there are many problems, some still unknown, which research on *Filipino Poetry in English* will have to "bring to terms." At times, indeed, listening to the poem's own voice as it were, we can take to heart Keats' Negative Capability which, he says, is a capacity for "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Among the more obvious problems is the *matter* of our poetry's "development." In literary history, the stress should fall on poetry's internal career; that is, as a first principle, on the *matter* of language—the language that the poems so-called create for poetry. Thereby, we temper the explanatory import, often merely alleged, of external forces. The Villa-Lopez debate, for example, on Art-for-Itself and Proletarian Literature is unresolvable except within the poems themselves as read.

A subsidiary issue is that of chronology or "literary period." Literary periodizings and characterizations are usually critical impositions, and "development" may not be such a neat and

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance and hospitality of Tomas and Brenda Arroyo who made available to us John Siler's *Filipiniana*—a veritable treasure-trove. Particularly valuable for our research was Siler's *Filipinas: An Anthology of Verse*, a 1045-page, two-volume typescript in three parts: poems in English by Filipinos (mainly from the early and mid-1930s); English translations (by Filipinos) of poetry in Spanish by Filipinos; and poems in English by Americans and other foreign writers on the Philippines.

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straight line of evolution. It bears stressing that in literary history, the history—author's biography, social data, politics—is a tool of understanding, a concession to rationality; but the literary is the chief object of wonder and delight. The individual poem—or body poetic—is not tied to the literary history; rather, the literary history is tied—somewhere, sometimes—to the poem.

Apart from the language that poetry creates for itself out of some natural language called English or Tagalog, the other *matter* of "development" is our reading of poetry. We—not the poem or poetry—are time-bound and culture-bound. The matter of our reading is always from some privileged standpoint or other. Every poem is productive of readings through time, while every reading worthy of the poem should be capable of liberating us from the prejudices and limitations of our time and culture. The tension between the privileged standpoint and possible readings against it should be fruitful, if at times disconcerting. We—the readers—produce our literature; the writers only make that possible. No people ever had a literature (even oral) that did not ceaselessly read, i.e., produce, their literature.

Whatever readings imply the matter of criteria or standards (among other extra-literary standpoints). We should always allow, however, for the poem's unpredictability. The best or most acceptable criteria come after the poem has been made. The poet does not write his poems with the criteria about him like strict attendants to his Muse. He has only a sense of the poem which the poem achieves when it has been writ.

THE MATTER OF "DEVELOPMENT"

We put the stress on the internal career of our poetry—that is, on both the *matter* of language and the *matter* of our readings as we ourselves, not the poems, change. The matter of language is not the subject or theme of a given piece of writing, nor even its natural medium called English or Tagalog, but the language that is created from poem to poem, the language that poetry creates for itself. The matter of our readings is more than their subject or theme; it is what we are, or what we have become, which precisely makes possible the subject or theme that our readings secrete. To put both matters succinctly: the poet produces the poem; the reader, its possible text.

Schneider speaks of the "development" of Philippine literature in English as metaphorically a biological process:

In our country, literature in English reached maturity only recently. We can go back to its birth some sixty years ago [from 1967], and all the phases of growth and struggle lie open before us. Its growth is similar to that of a child. A few years ago we saw him playfully imitate his elders. We watched how he discovered himself in adolescence and, finally, how he became aware of his environment and of other people as he approached maturity. Our literature is like that. Only a few years ago our writers were imitating. Then over a period of some score years the child grew up and today we have a literature that is both national and true to its name.¹

The metaphor subverts itself. How meaningful are such "phases" of development in a literary history of only "some sixty years"—any writer's normal life-span 'hopefully'? Is literature "born" or produced and renewed by its readers? And after "maturity"—what other fortune? The "we" too in Schneider's passage is a rhetorical ploy; it interpellates us, its reader, as the authoritative critic with his reading to-day of a 'unified field' called Philippine Letters. Indeed, the impression could arise (no doubt unintended) that no literature existed before English or that Filipinos as writers are newcomers in the field. As to "national" literature—that may be a function of time, education, and readership, and "true to its name" is of course idiomatic, but the figures—Truth and Name—ever veil their mysteries.

The metaphor of birth for the body literary also sponsors kindred metaphors of growth and maturity which orient our perception. We perceive development rather than renewal, and so achieve those images of child, adolescent, and adult for the literary organism. Yet those images, if we work outside their pale, are instructive.

CHILD

Much of any body of poetry at any time anywhere is imitative. In our case, the sonnet, for example, was once regarded as the test of poetic mettle. The 'early' Filipino poet—then, as even now—was

1. Herbert Schneider, S.J., "The Period of Emergence of Philippine Letters (1930-1944)," in *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Tradition and Literature*, ed. Antonio Manuud (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila, 1967), p. 575.

imitative, but hardly playful; many were in dead earnest and so 'died' early and out of humor. Yet others were playful in an important literary sense; they took a certain delight and wonder over the new language, its cultural riches and certain powers that it afforded over other reaches of mind and spirit. Such delight and wonder produced a certain intellectual and spiritual liberation, for a new order of words had made possible a new order of thought and feeling. It called forth our first verses which, when they succeeded as poems, had a freshness—we might even say, a soulfulness—that today our jaded eyes, our intellectual sophistication, may easily fail to recognize. And this perhaps is the best "explanation" for the emergence of Philippine Letters *from* English (rather than *in*)—simply the fact that Filipino writers were fascinated, as all writers are, with the new language, and wrote and wrought out of that fascination, out of what they knew and felt as Filipinos (acculturated or not), and out of love for poetry. They had a vested interest in poetry, whether in their own native languages or in Spanish or English; they groped as they would in any language, even their own, and found the poem—the Filipino poem and the Filipino mythology as well—as they would in any case, in any natural language, since they wrote out of what they knew and felt, and desired the poem for itself. Before we even knew it, there were poems; perhaps because we did not read well and so produce our body literary, the poems—some, or a good number—passed us by.

ADOLESCENT

Much of poetry anywhere at any time is juvenile. If by poetry, however, we refer to a more or less fixed canon, a prior question is how the canon was produced—in all probability, by the school system or the educated class. The marks of the poet's adolescence and early maturity—self-discovery, "awareness of environment and other people"—are not really stages in poetry's development; we must not confuse the poet and his psychology with either his poems or poetry in general. Thus, child, adolescent, and adult are finally distortive, falsifying images. There is no literature "like that": is Chaucerian 'child,' Shakespearian 'adolescent,' and Miltonian 'adult'? There is no development "like that," even for a whole "literary period"; such a whole, in fact, is a reading from a

privileged standpoint in the present which enables us to perceive "early," "middle," and "modern" phases.²

ADULT, MATURE

Thus we speak today of our body poetic, little aware that we, not the poem, are time-bound and culture-bound. Poems in the thirties may well be as "mature" as poems in the eighties; since "maturity," however, is often a judgment from our reading or *con-text* (what goes with our reading or makes it possible), we should rather say, 'Whatever their times, they are poems.' Our distinctions and criteria cannot comprehend all poems; we have our academic and other endemic biases and our ideological interests, and every reader is an individual sensibility.

Thus, it seems best to assume that the poem simply arises and defines itself—out of solitude and liberation; poem after poem, some, in our reading today, bad, some good, and some indifferent; and over an indefinable span of time, we—the readers, constantly bridging past and future—constantly produce our body poetic and its history. The canon changes; there are interesting fossils, survivals, and late arrivals. For the 'nature' of poetry itself is never homogeneous; it remains unfixed by definition, and so, ever discoverable. We the readers produce our literature; the writers only make it possible for us. Chief among our social institutions, the school—where most critics are—produces the reader. The school establishes and propagates both the literary canon and 'Index' (works banned, neglected, or dismissed as 'inferior'). But the poem may subvert its academic treatment; it may also produce its readers.

The poem then creates its own space and so, resists our time. Thus, chronology may play havoc with judgment; in light of the myth of development, for example, an "early" poem is perforce imitative, naive, romantic. But "early" is temporal; the label labels us, now—our own standpoint, our reading of the poems; it does not particularly concern the poem itself. Our tyranny is easily shown up when we reflect how often that pronoun—*we, our*—flatters us by excluding all others in the past or in the future; only

2. As in Richard V. Croghan, S.J., *The Development of Philippine Literature in English (since 1900)* (Quezon City: Alemar-Phoenix, 1975).

our reading (our present time and context) seems pertinent. But the poem only seeks its own nature—a possible definition of it. It may often fail—not in our reading as in its own speech; but when it succeeds, according to its own terms (its own rules, its own words—somehow similar, somehow different from other poems), its own voice is what sponsors, or should, our reading. If and when the poem fails, it has neither space nor time; it loses itself.

Yet we cannot deny altogether the historical fact of development. Poetry is still material, even as language is. But such development as pertains to it is not essentially temporal. Time is merely the poem's accident—like the poet himself, a part of the poem's fortune. The most basic fact is that, through many crises in language, through various experiments and aberrations within the infinitely productive realm of a given natural language, such or such poems came to be: from early Daguo, "Man of Earth," say, to late Daguo, "Off the Aleutian Islands"; or from early Villa, a noise of words ("Christ adventuring in my mind") to late Villa, a stillness of words ("Inviting a tiger for a weekend"). Thus we would have, as far as possible, an internal history, a continuing dialectic between readers (conditioned but not necessarily trapped by their historical contexts) and poems (sometimes theirs, sometimes not). In such a history, there is always continuity where the poems 'present,' as there are always gaps where the poems 'future.' The matter of development, if we respect the poem's space, is never a straight line. There are numerous detours and byways. This may also be seen with the poem's readers, past and present, as part of the poem's fortune: there are communions and breakups.

Neither do we wish to deny what Schneider calls "the external and internal forces which shaped Philippine writing in English" or "the events and ideas . . . which influenced and directed writers" and so "shaped and formed" their literary "works."³ Those forces, those events and ideas after all did transpire; presumably, they must have somehow *in-formed* the poems and so continue to inform them even if only according to our various perceptions of those events and ideas. But the poems themselves always have an even more interesting if not entirely independent career in both the matter of language that they contrive or *in-vent* (for art is artifice) and the matter of our reading (for readers, if fallible, yet

3. Schneider, "The Period of Emergence," pp. 575-76.

alone produce the poem's possible text). The poem does not exist in an ethereal space like a Platonic Idea; it is always already writ, and its text is ever produced by its readers. From reader to reader, it remains a poem, this writ or scripture now, but not the same text; this is why poem is indefinable. The poet produces the poem with words and words that have not till then been possible; but now, within the poem, this verbal artifact, certain possibilities of words we thought we knew have been released (we do not say, realized or achieved, since such terms would seem to limit those possibilities); and thus, the reader, by and with those words, produces the poem's possible text—one possible reading. The poem itself is not reproducible; the poet as its first reader can only *trans-late* it—that is, bear it across its own words and so produce a possible reading of it. He can also write yet another poem. There is the poem as writ, and then there is the poem as read. Perhaps too, mind itself is a state of language.

THE MATTER OF "LITERARY ACCEPTABILITY"

The "literary acceptability"⁴ of the "early" poems becomes a problem only when one imposes present standards or adheres to fixed and universal criteria. Neither is the problem, chiefly arising from such imposition, resolved by strict regard for the poem's own time and place, as when Castrence invokes Taine's "*le milieu et le moment*," nor by due appreciation of the poem's roots in an accepted tradition, as when one speaks of imitation and influence.

It seems best to let the poem *be* awhile when we come upon it—sometimes, a very long while; to let it speak for itself, without the intervention of ready and definite criteria, as it were arrayed for its reception; to allow it to work, if it can, its effect on us, without any anxiety over its final worth. Finally, of course, we would still have to judge and choose—which ends the poetic affair. Criteria of one sort or another are simply unavoidable, even if on principle one resists their fixity or universality. No reading—since one does read the poem—is secreted except out of hidden assumptions about its object. But more important than the criteria or as-

4. Pura Santillan-Castrence, "The Period of Apprenticeship" in *Brown Heritage*, p. 548.

sumptions, which always need to be foregrounded, is the frame of mind—a certain capacity for wonder and delight—by which one discriminates amongst poems. One does not come to them with “armed vision,” fully equipped with rules and standards; rather does one, like Stevens’ Snow Man, become “nothing himself,” —innocent, as it were, of accepted notions of poetry—and so behold “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” Behold the poem—the architecture of its words, as the words cohere; and behold the nothing—passage and play of words, as the words fall. If criteria are finally unavoidable, so are the risks, with or without them; but the risks one takes without them are perhaps more open to new possibilities in art since art loves, above all, its freedom.

Perhaps one way of illustrating our meaning for that frame of mind or disposition which risks the poem by evading its definition is to say that what poetry comprehends by “communication” is *communion*. We always demand that the poem communicate to us since it is after all a piece of writing: ‘What is it saying? What is its message? What do these words and figures mean?’ We ask the same question of poetry as we ask of prose, although almost miraculously we distinguish them. We forget, perhaps from a habit of prose, that the poem seeks to communicate with us; it does not so much say anything to us as it *speaks us*. Indeed, it is a peace of writing; it stills the noise of daily words or their daily uses; it is a stillness where all the meanings are. The poem seeks not a mass audience but another poet-soul. It is this aspect of poetry that makes it seem aloof from everyday reality and concerns—social, political, economic; yet, it is what one seeks when one turns to poetry—a stillness of words. The poem, like all things of human worth, is not merely to read, it is to live. Why indeed turn to poetry if one seeks what one already knows and wearies of in his heart? Criteria belong to everyday reality; this is why the poem must always resist them almost successfully. If Villa had written poems only according to accepted notions of the poem, and hewed closely to fixed and universal standards of literary merit, he would not have become Doveglion—the unicorn in the herd. There are many poetic failures in Villa; “The bright, centipede,” is a little noisy, the words seem trapped in the same *vocabula*—“spiritual, spiritual, spiritual” and, also, on a sudden, “radium brain.” But these failures made possible his poems; in fact, our

perception of those failures arises chiefly in light of, or from our delight with, those true and successful poems in our reading by which Villa is composed.

The great poetic traditions are monuments built by individual talent. Schools and critics are the custodians of those monuments; some may already be mausoleums. We cannot suppose that anyone could or should write Keatsian Odes now, or produce a work comparable with Spencer's *Faerie Queene*. Fernando Marag and Virgilio Floresca seem among our "early" poets to be the most steeped in the English poetic tradition from Spencer to Arnold. Reading them now—as then, too—we seem to be reading Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. The English poetic tradition was, for our writers, a source of both strength and weakness; if Floresca had not died young, under tragic circumstances, he might very well have become a greater poet, as some sonnets in *Tiger, Tiger*⁵ show. The fact, however, remains that over literary mausoleums are writ the words: "Enough is enough."

The poet, when he writes his poem, does not sit and write with the criteria about him. He is not guided through his poem's words by definite criteria, but only by his own sense of the poem. He creates both the poem and its language. The good poem is a simple and irreducible fact. It is invulnerable to our criteria. The poet has his muse, the critic his criteria. The reader should not be caught between poet and critic. The poem seeks him; if he responds, it is not from a welter of criteria, but from the poem's own space. He responds because the poem *speaks him*. The poem words him—only, it may be, his unexamined ideology, and so, it refreshes him; but sometimes, it may also be, his heretofore nameless discontent with the gaps and uncertainties in that ideology. We must screw our courage to this sticking-place; this openness to the poem, whatever the poem be, and whatever the criteria that apply or do not.

5. Virgilio Floresca, *Tiger, Tiger and Other Poems*. Unpublished 111-page typescript in the Siler Filipiniana.

THE DUPLICITY OF CRITERIA: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

For over three decades, *Philippine Prose and Poetry*⁶ shaped our "national" literature in English to the extent that it shaped the young readers' sensibility. Both shapes may have uncertain status, but they are there—facts, things done and perhaps doing well enough, and subject of course to various readings from varying perspectives. In making use of "exclusively local contributions in literature," *PPP* recognized as early as 1927 a body literary in English of adequate quality, at least "as subject matter for classroom instruction in secondary schools."⁷ Yet, when "first conceived," within the anthology-series an incipient split may already be seen between the practical need for instructional materials⁸ and the more purely literary motive to "inspire the students and arouse in them a desire for emulation, and thus aid in the development of latent ability."⁹

From 1927 to 1960, *PPP* was innocent, as it were, of the gap or split. Then, in 1960, a welter of other "bases" and "goals"¹⁰ subverted the heretofore seemingly dominant criterion of "literary merit"¹¹; subverted, because literary merit as a criterion was merely conceded, not examined; it did not seem problematic. As the Foreword to Vol. One (1960) tells us:

Other *criteria* considered . . . are: how well the selections meet the principles embodied in the objectives of education enunciated by the Board of National Education; how well adapted they are to the vocabulary level, interest and needs of present first year students; how truly up-to-date they are in the sense that the information they dish out is true to present conditions.

The same Foreword concludes:

Though literary excellence has not been disregarded in the choice of selections, the greater number has been judged from the standpoint of ease and smoothness of language and range of experience within the reach of young

6. Bureau of Education, *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, 4 vols. (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1927, Vol. 1; 1933, Vol. 2; 1938, Vol. 3; , Vol. 4).

7. Luther B. Bewley (Director of Education), "Foreword" to Vol. 1, *PPP* (1927), p. 3.

8. In Bewley's words, "to meet more nearly the need of secondary students." ("Foreword" to Vol. 1, *PPP* (1935), p. 3).

9. *PPP* (1927), p. 3.

10. Vol. 3 (1961), p. iv.

11. *Ibid.*

adolescents. This is the reason for the absence here of prize-winning poems, stories, plays or essays by some writers who are among the best in our country today.¹²

The Foreword to Volume Two (1964) is more explicit and straightforward: "In addition to developing taste for good literature this volume particularly aims at developing in the students the spirit of nationalism and other traits of good citizenship."¹³ *In addition to*: there is the subverting *et* in the tradition standard of *dulce et utile*; the *et* reverses it operationally to *utile et dulce*. As the "Foreword" puts it: "Readability, up-to-dateness [or relevance, as we would now say], and effectiveness in developing character in our young were among the chief criteria." In fact, the various Forewords to *PPP* throughout its printing history are quite fond of the word *development*, as though there were a "developmental literature" "(as in that strange concoction called "developmental journalism")—a literature reduced to its uses, chiefly moral and political. The reader of course is reduced to a passive consumer; the selections have been pre-read the better to serve the interests of the ruling ideology.

The Foreword to Vol. Three (1961) is even more revealing. It asserts that: (1) Literary works were "selected on the bases of their literary merit, theme, readability, and interest element (sic) to the students who will use them"; and (2) "Among a score of goals", Vol. Three was "intended to channel student interest toward increased reading; to build in him a critical and fine literary taste; to widen his perspective by vicarious experience; to stir a consciousness of one-ness (sic) with his fellow beings; and finally to help him cut out (sic) a healthy pattern of living."

In that helter-skelter—perhaps a perfect image of the education bureaucracy, or what Althusser calls an "ideological state apparatus" as it seeks to veil its hidden interests—what seems to gain the upper hand is what the Foreword's anonymous author calls "the literary dictum of interest": that is, the student's interest "since the reader benefits fully when his reading is self-propelled. Compulsory reading informs, but it does not educate in the largest sense." Apart from the seemingly liberal attitude toward education

12. The "Foreword" is signed by B. Aldana, director of Public Schools. Underscoring ours.

13. The "Foreword" is unsigned.

and the refreshing confidence in students, chiefly at issue is whether the "interest element" is at all literary, or—to put it differently—whether a reader, without literary training or a certain amount of exposure, could produce the poem, i.e., a reading worthy of its object. The Foreword explains the process of selection. Whenever the compilers "could not decide which selection by an author is the most representative, they fell back on the students as final arbiter. A group of curriculum writers, . . . set out in representative school areas to learn principally from student reactions which materials were to be included . . . and which to discard." The student, say, fourteen years old, is the "final arbiter," he decides which work by an author is his "most representative" on the basis of the student's own interest at the time, in his own home province, at his age. If the indecisive compilers had fallen back on themselves instead, they might have scrutinized their criteria—and saved too on their budget! But it was of course a myth, despite the field trips of curriculum writers. The final compilers still had to cull the materials on the other "bases of literary merit, theme, readability, . . . maximum representation of past and contemporary writers . . . (and) a score of goals."

The Foreword to Vol. Four (1951) is still more explicit and charming in its way. "It is the purpose of the Bureau (of Public Schools) to develop in our students an appreciation of our culture and traditions, . . . our dreams and aspirations, our struggles and victories as embodied in our literature." *As embodied* it is perfectly innocent; it does not seem aware that the literary imagination often transforms historical material for purposes of its art. Truth may be one, as we hope, but the different pathways to it already change our readings of it. One is tempted to suggest that the best history, being a form of literature or mythology, can very well match the 'emotional appeal' of poetry, and so might better serve in "developing nationalism and good citizenship." It may also be that our defeats are more revealing than our "victories." But the Foreword continues unperturbed:

The triple test of excellence (artistry, vitality, and significance), in the manner of a more famous critic, Edward O'Brien as well as the double standard of criticism for literature set up by Prof. Frederick A. Pottle of Yale has helped guide the editors and judges . . . According to this last standard, literature should be viewed both from the aesthetic and from the moral points of view. In evaluating each story, poem, essay, or drama, these

questions were kept in mind, "Has the author succeeded in transmitting to young people a genuine experience?" and "Is the experience they will derive beneficial or harmful?" This double standard has been considered essential, for (Vol. Four) is going to be used by young people in the fourth year, who are just learning to formulate their sense of values.

One need hardly comment on how "the triple test" is conceded and then "the double standard" preferred: or how, by the reading lamp of those deciding questions, "the moral" quite overpowers "the aesthetic." One need not wonder that Villa, among others, could not be selected, or that Tarrosa-Subido's passion is preferred to Manalang-Gloria's. The poem, it seems, must be capable of producing only readings that foster the time's accepted values. Thus, of course, the reader is preempted. It might be illuminating to probe the editors' reading of Carlos Bulosan's "If You Want To Know Who We Are" which was included.¹⁴

Thus, literary merit as a criterion, placed among a score of other "bases" and "goals," was simply dissolved. Student's interest, theme, readability (or teachability), the civic and moral lesson, all tend to adjust the literary selection for an average level, that for example of the high school reader. They also undercut the poem; it is distrusted since it must be capable of certain uses by the reading lamp of certain goals. Of course, there may be no choice in literary education at its various levels in the school system. And yet that precisely is our point: if the poem's possible uses subsume the poem's merit, our sense of the poem may be undermined. *Dulce et utile*: what is your reading?—sweetness and light (Arnold); delight and wisdom (Frost); pleasure and value; leisure and work (Pieper) . . . Yet dulce is first because it makes possible utile; but the source of trouble is the et, that anxious ampersand which the poem itself does not recognize, that omnivorous conjunction which preys on the first term. Dulce is proper to literature, utile to life; the et is an ideological bridge. To cross that bridge from literature to life is to examine our ideology which supports and justifies both literature and life. We must cross the bridge wide awake so as not to confuse the reasons for dulce and the reasons

14. Vol. 4 (1951), p. 147. Cf. E. San Juan, Jr., *Bulosan: An Introduction With Selections* (Metro Manila: National Bookstore, 1983)—a possible reading; the poem—"If You Want To Know *What* We Are" (underscoring mine)—appears on pp. 124-26. Is it the same poem? Is it the same text?

for utile, and so as to be aware, at the very least, that we have in fact crossed over, perhaps, the same ideological stream. The et as ideological marker is both bridge and stream; it connects and divides; it connects where our ideology helps us live our lives, where it words us and so comforts us; it divides where the inherent gaps and contradictions in our ideology unsettle us, where we lose our words and so, in that fruitful silence, seek a new integration.

Literary merit as a criterion, precisely because it is an open and unresolved question, could become a catalyst for a literature aware of its own assumptions; that is, critically aware of the matter of language and the matter of possible readings (possible texts), for all the ideological inscription in both. But in *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, literary merit could not become such a catalyst through lack of constant analysis of its presuppositions, insights, and uncertainties; rather was it assimilated, through the imperialism of teaching goals, into a pedagogical apparatus that served a conservative bourgeois-democratic ideology that was more passively accepted than consciously (critically) lived.