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## Balagtasismo Versus Modernismo

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motivation — e.g., “disdain for darker races” (page 31). As everyone knows, the failure of the anti-imperialists to influence official decisions came from their lack of political clout, just as the success of the expansionists, whatever their reason, was due precisely to their power or closeness to the decision makers in Washington, D.C.

At this point, obviously, the matter is academic. No amount of hand-wringing or censuring can alter the past. But, as noted in S. P. Lopez’s Foreword, the book receives added value from the introductory essay which situates the authors in their historical context, and helps to provide a “living testimonial” to the democratic tradition that gave birth to the U.S.

Not to be overlooked is the brief “Epilogue” which closes the book. After a summary of contemporary anti-imperialist writing, Dr. Bresnahan looks at the Filipino reaction to the continued “special relations” between the Philippines and the United States. He does well in hinting that the problem is actually part of the larger question of how, in the present technological advance of the industrialized capitalist nations, the Third World countries can develop without having to swallow their pride and accept a neocolonial status dependent on the former.

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BALAGTASISMO VERSUS MODERNISMO. By Virgilio S. Almario.  
Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1984.

A number of studies have been made on various aspects of Tagalog poetry both diachronically (in time) and synchronically (form and structure). Lope K. Santos, Julian Cruz Balmaseda, Iñigo Ed. Regalado were a few of the older critics who have sought to explain the evolution of poetry historically. Teo Gener and Fernando Monleon, on the other hand, have studied Tagalog poetry in terms of its structure. Of the modern critics, Bienvenido Lumbea, Pedro Ricarte and Epifanio San Juan, Jr., among others, have subjected Tagalog poetry—both traditional and modern—to a rigorous analysis. A large number of these works are either historical surveys which lead to various forms of generalization, or individual exegeses of modern poems, analyses which are often abstracted from history and the poet’s consciousness. In a few cases, poets functioning as critics have been compelled to defend the particular position and poetic modes that they have appropriated as poets; such is the case in the criticism of Alejandro Abadilla and Pedro Ricarte. The same defensive stance characterized Virgilio Almario’s first book of criticism, *Ang Makata sa Panahon ng Makina* (1972).

In the recently published *Balagtasismo Versus Modernismo*, Virgilio Almario appears in the text primarily as a critic seeking to clarify the terms of what has been generally termed a debate between two schools of thought—that which subscribes to the practise identified with Francisco Balagtas, and that which has been shaped by Modernist tendencies. On the surface, the study seems to promise an analysis of the two terms as thoroughly antagonistic. In this view, clashes between *Balagtasismo* and *Modernismo* as two dominant tendencies have resulted in the production of two distinct types of poetry. Lope K. Santos, Jose Corazon de Jesus, Teo Baylen, among others, represent the tradition inherited from Balagtas. *Modernismo*, on the other hand, appears in the works of Alejandro G. Abadilla, Rogelio Mangahas, Jose Lacaba, to name a few. In this same traditional view, it is easy to perceive the conflict in terms of the native pitting itself against the foreign.

But a close reading of Almario's text shows that the critic's actual project is to problematize these taken-for-granted views regarding the relationship between traditional and modern poetry. Because it has been fraught with many contradictions and fissures at the same time that it has been characterized by convergences, the development of Tagalog poetry has to be examined from a conceptual framework that will admit of both consonance and dissonance.

Thus it is necessary for Almario to introduce a paradigm, the terms of which will have to be defined by the critic himself. *Balagtasismo* appears as a complex system of creation/production, distribution and influence, a whole discursive practise that has conditioned much of traditional poetry, especially that written in the first half of the twentieth century. *Modernismo*, on the other hand, is put forward as the other system which has shaped Tagalog poetry, specifically that written by Abadilla and a generation of younger poets.

In effect, what Almario has done is to constitute certain realities through his own discourse. There was no concept of *Balagtasismo* until Almario came along and employed the term to encompass a whole complex of ideas and actual poetic and critical practises. *Modernism* has very specific meanings in the West, but *Modernismo* as constituted in this book refers to the native poets' deployment of the Modernist mode in writing poetry which has also been determined by aesthetic and historical forces. By appropriating a concept from the past—*Balagtasismo*—and from the West—*Modernism*—and by giving them specific parameters, Almario tries to encapsulate not only the complex interaction between distinct literary tendencies, but perhaps more importantly the inevitable convergence between aesthetics and politics.

Consequently, the book's problematic is not so much to determine the specific areas of influence identified with either *Balagtasismo* or *Modernismo* as to point out how deeply rooted in history and ideology *Balagtasismo* and *Modernismo* have been as discursive practises. In other words, the analysis

is not based on a purely formalist, ahistorical critical stance. The study is meant to take into account the sociopolitical dimensions that have conditioned the paths taken by both *Balagtasismo* and *Modernismo*. As Almario himself avers:

Ang buong modelong *Balagtasismo-Modernismo* ay isang paraan ng pagtatanghal sa naging pagsulong ng kamulang Pilipino sa loob ng ika-20 siglo sa pamamagitan ng pagtula sa ilalim ng naghahatakan ding impluwensiya ng Tradisyon at Americanisasyon. (p. 33)

In the first section called "*Pasakalye*," Almario attempts to explain his critical framework. He refutes the notion that literature was merely an effect of the Americanization process. He argues that by resorting to his paradigm, it is possible to examine literature, specifically poetry, in terms of acceptance of and/or resistance to the colonial process. The merging of aesthetics and politics is envisioned by Almario as inhering in the three aspects of the debate between *Balagtasismo* and *Modernismo*; these are the specific world views each espoused, especially in their reaction to Americanization; the aesthetic principles informing each trend; and the particular ways in which each explored and deployed language.

In Almario's view, *Balagtasismo* has an inherent conservative ideological basis manifested in its anti-American stance, its adherence to the literary tradition crystallized in Balagtas' works, and in its self-conscious aggrandizement of pure Tagalog. Side by side with its conservative outlook is its progressive view expressed in the early decades of the twentieth century, when it led to the production of poems which tackled sociopolitical issues. This progressive view, explains Almario, gradually gave way to idealist and sentimental tendencies that led to pure nostalgia. *Modernismo*, on the other hand, arose as a reaction against *Balagtasismo* and its dominant world view and aesthetics. It set itself up initially as a foil to the extreme conservatism of *Balagtasismo*, so that Tagalog poetry could open itself up to other influences that could help the poets delineate society's changing realities.

Running as a common denominator between the two constructs, continues Almario, is the strong sense of nationalism that defines each. *Balagtasismo* has displayed this nationalistic spirit in its anti-American stance and in its deliberate use of such categories as "freedom" and "love of country" in poetry. *Modernismo* demonstrates its nationalism in its attempt to reflect societal and political concerns that characterize Fil-American relations.

After establishing the conceptual framework, Almario proceeds to a detailed examination of the different ways in which *Balagtasismo* has nurtured and has in turn been enriched by various traditional poets. In the first chapter, the critic analyzes the roots of *Balagtasismo* as seen in the writings of Balagtas, and the subsequent proliferation of categories and concepts that poets such as those writing in the first two decades seized and held on to as poetic canons. Contextualized against historical developments, *Balagtasismo* is re-

vealed by Almario as partly the result of the poets' defensive gesture against the onslaught of Americanization. Moreover, Balagtatismo is shown to be shaped by the prevalent norms identified with oral poetry. In Almario's view, Jose Corazon de Jesus remains the best exemplification of the positive tendencies of Balagtatismo.

Chapters two and three are centered on the development of Modernismo as a principal influence upon the writings immediately before and after the Second World War. The second chapter deals with the first wave of modernist poets that included Abadilla and those who attempted to absorb certain Modernist techniques. Chapter III zeroes in on the achievements of such younger poets as Rogelio Mangahas, Lamberto Antonio, Rio Alma and the Bagay poets, among others. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the Marxist intervention that took place in the late sixties and early seventies, and the consequent changes in the poetry and criticism during the period. For Almario, activism enabled the leading Modernist poets to repudiate the rather limited and individualistic outlook fostered by Modernism as a mode. In doing so, these poets became truly involved and committed writers employing their craft to address pressing contemporary issues.

In the last section, Almario raises a number of issues regarding the nature and functions of partisan literature in the context of society's present needs. Almario takes to task both pro-government writings and works that have been considered committed/nationalist poetry; both types exhibit reductionist and romantic tendencies. For Almario, critical thinking should inform literature that really serves the people's interest. He articulates the goals of critical thinking thus:

Ang ganitong programa ng kritikal na pagsulat ay hindi gaanong magiging interesado sa kamulatan bilang "mulat na" o ganap na pag-iisip gaya ng madalas ipanukala ng partisanong pagsulat na makiling sa paghahati ng mga ganap nang puwersang pampulitika at kumakatawan sa "progresibo" o "reaksiyonyong" ganap na kaisipan. Higit na lilingapin nito ang pagtatanghal kung paano nabubuo o lumulukso ang isip tungo sa isang kamulatan at sa gayo'y nailalagay sa iba't ibang pagtayang historikal ang iba't ibang proseso ng karanasan. (p. 325)

It is by posing certain crucial questions that Almario chooses to end this most polemical section of his work.

What then are the values of this volume?

Firstly, by providing a paradigm meant to shed light on the complex process of the development of poetry, Almario has done literary theory and research a great deal of service. As a serviceable paradigm, Balagtatismo-Modernismo aids the reader in making sense of the complicated linkages in our culture and history. Secondly, Almario's detailed discussion of trends and movements (including representative poets and their works) effectively

combines approaches used in literary history and social history. The result is a fascinating study of individual writers and their milieu. Lastly, by raising crucial issues related not only to purely aesthetic concerns but to the relationship between poetry and politics, Almario has succeeded in problematizing a number of areas which ought to be discussed more rigorously in other forums.

*Balagtatismo Versus Modernismo* does not pass itself off as the definitive answer to the myriad questions plaguing literary history and criticism, especially in this period of crisis. The book remains the result of a critic's perception and understanding of a specific area of cultural life. That this critical project has chosen not merely to affirm taken-for-granted realities, but to question and subvert these presuppositions is a healthy sign that there still exist some areas for dissent and constructive criticism. It is to Almario's credit that he has decided to write a book that confronts basic issues related to politics and history.

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ESSAYS ON LITERATURE AND SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: POLITICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES. Edited by Tham Seong Chee. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981. xii, 360 pages.

The focus of this volume is on literature as a sociological phenomenon in contemporary Southeast Asian societies, a sociological as well as a literary manifestation of the process of change and modernization. "It is not a literary study in the conventional sense where the intrinsic properties of plot, characterization, and literary style dominate. It is a critical account of literature as a societal phenomenon . . ." (p. vii). There are two articles each on Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam. There is only one article, however, on Cambodia, one on Singapore, and one very interesting article by John Clammer on Straits Chinese literature. The editor says it was not possible to obtain a contribution on Laos. Each article includes a bibliography of the more important works on literature discussed.

There is no doubt that literature is a "social creation." But the deeper question which has occupied literary critics is whether literature is expressive of society, or determinative. Traditional criticism has pretty much accepted De Bonald's dictum that "literature is an expression of society" for literature does provide a rich source for the study of social history, customs, culture and the political milieu. But literature, on the other hand, can also be studied