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## **PAEF 1976 Seminar: Trends in Philippine Literary Scholarship**

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## Special Report

### **PAEF 1976 Seminar: Trends in Philippine Literary Scholarship**

EDNA ZAPANTA-MANLAPAZ

Seminars of professional groups have a valuable function as indicators of developments within that field. The seminar on literature and society held in October 1976 under the auspices of the Philippine-American Educational Foundation, which was attended by some 40 delegates representing various colleges and universities around the country, appears to have served that function in a particularly eminent way. Thus this special report is less an account of the proceedings of that seminar than a demonstration of it as such an indicator.

The 1976 seminar was the eleventh in a series of seminars on American studies begun in 1964, the inaugural seminar of which was on American literature. The 1976 seminar is only the second of the series dealing with literature, the intermediate ones having been on other areas of Americana. The 10-year interval situates us in a convenient position from which to review the changes that have taken place in Philippine literary scholarship during the last decade.

The most obvious change is the shift in the direction of Philippine literary scholarship away from Western (specifically, Anglo-American) literature toward Philippine (especially vernacular) literature. This shift, though gradual, has reached the point where it has been institutionalized in the form of revised curricula and academic programs. Where just a few years ago the only degree programs in literature available were those in English, several universities have recently initiated programs in either comparative or Philippine literature.

The cross-cultural approach to literature, which has gained much support in recent years, was employed in five of the papers delivered during the seminar. The keynote lecture, "The Self and the Nation: A Comparative Study," delivered by a visiting Fulbright-Hays professor of American literature, Dr. Roger Bresnahan, traced the parallel course taken by Philippine and American history and, by extension, literatures. The papers of four foreign delegates — from Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Malaysia — demonstrated the usefulness of the cross-cultural approach as a means of promoting understanding among peoples, especially within the Third World. Though these papers elicited the attentive response of the delegates, it was clear from their questions and comments that they were not as interested in these literatures in themselves as in their relation to Philippine literature.

The preoccupation of the delegates with Philippine literature underscores the dramatic change that has taken place in the consciousness of Filipino literary scholars. Less than two decades ago, the necessity and desirability of a national literature in the vernacular was a proposition to be debated. Today that proposition has become the basic assumption underlying almost all discussions of Philippine literature.

That a foreign language cannot be an effective vehicle for an authentic national literature has been all but unanimously accepted by Filipino literary scholars, conceded even by many of those who had once been true believers in the viability of a Philippine literature written in English. One such convert is Salvador P. Lopez, whose paper was appropriately titled "*Literature and Society: A Literary Past Revisited.*" The allusion is to his book *Literature and Society*, which since its publication in 1940, has served as the historic manifesto of a school of critics who believe that the primary function of literature is the "criticism of life" in the Matthew Arnold sense of the phrase. Through the years Lopez has been a defender of the faith professed in that creed but he now confesses that there are some articles there that he has come to doubt, even to deny. One of these has to do with the future of Philippine literature in English:

My expectations in this regard were exaggerated, even hyperbolic. English cannot be the vehicle of a truly Filipino national literature. That I once thought it could be must be laid to the fact that I was writing under the influence of the euphoria that preceded the Commonwealth Literary

Contests of 1940, when . . . Filipino writers in English seemed capable of producing works in any literary genre with a technical virtuosity and creative power far beyond anything that the writers in Tagalog could show. There seemed no limit to what they could do.

Today, however, we must trim our sights. I know that gifted Filipino writers will continue to write in English and produce works of importance that will endure. But it is also clear that we can no longer put all our literary eggs in the basket marked "English."

But to concede that English cannot be the proper medium of Philippine national literature is a negative conclusion. If not in English, then in what language? Ordinarily, the question would not have to be raised at all, since the obvious answer is the vernacular language. However, the linguistic situation in the country admits of no such facile answer. The existence of eight major languages in the Philippines, not one of which is the native tongue of the majority of the inhabitants, renders the question far from academic. The question was resolved — at least in principle — in 1937 when the Institute of National Language was founded to promulgate Pilipino as the national language. It is said that practice follows principle; in fact, practice often lags behind principle. Today, 40 years later, it is estimated that still only 44 percent of the total population can speak Pilipino.\* Though the figure represents a remarkable increase for that period of time, it is clear that it will take some time before Pilipino becomes the lingua franca of the Filipinos.

Though none of the delegates regard the promulgation of Pilipino as a serious threat to the continued existence of other vernacular languages, they nevertheless were very vocal in expressing their dismay over what seems to them the unwarranted depreciation of regional literatures. Resil Mojares's paper, "On the Significance of Regional Literature," voices the legitimate complaint that too often, regional literatures have been consigned to the level of subliteratures. Why this has been the case is explained by Mojares in these terms:

In many cases in the past, the "national" literature has been uncritically equated with the ruling literatures — the literature of "court and capital," one largely produced and patronized by a small cultural elite and externally defined by its use of a foreign medium (Spanish and English); and, to a certain extent, the literature of the primate region of the country though

\*1970 Census. Cited in *The Philippine Atlas*, Vol. 1 (Manila: Fund for Assistance to Private Education, 1975).

this may be written in a native language (i.e., Tagalog) as well as popular in character.

Because of such uncritical equations, judgments on Philippine literature have often been distorted by deducing from a limited area truths which are then made to generally apply to the total field of "Philippine literature."

Such a distortion can only be corrected by thorough regional and cross-regional studies, claims Mojares. Only then can Philippine literary history be rewritten in such a way as to present the overall continuity of Philippine literary tradition.

Fortunately, regional studies have been steadily undertaken over the last several years and are now yielding impressive results. One of the most animated discussions during the seminar was occasioned by a panel presentation on six major vernacular literatures (Damiana Eugenio on Tagalog, Marcelino Foronda on Ilocano, Wilhelmina Ramas on Cebuano, Lucila Hosillos on Hiligaynon, Lilia Realubit on Bicol and Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz on Pampangan literature). Collectively, their reports show how much these vernacular literatures have to contribute to the body of national literature. The panelists were one in their conviction that pluralism in this case both provides for and so proves the plenitude of Philippine literature.

E. Arsenio Manuel's paper on "Literature in Ethnic Oral Traditions" opens with the disarming definition of literature as "any artistic creative piece, whether written or oral, which we can enjoy repeatedly." Academicians will probably protest the inadequacy of this definition but *aficionados* will welcome it as a sign that the demarcation line between written and oral literature is no longer the great divide that it has been in the past. This is not to say that the distinction between them is no longer real or that it should no longer be respected; it is to say that Filipino literary scholars, by stressing the similarities rather than the differences between the two types of literatures, have become less condescending in their attitude toward folk literature. For too long, Filipino literary scholars have either relegated folk literature to the level of sub-literature, or worse, ignored it altogether as nonliterature. For whatever reasons, the fact remains that until recently, Filipino literary scholars have left the collection and study of folk literature to anthropologists like Manuel. Were it not for these colleagues in the social sciences, a substantial part of folk literature would have been permanently lost to literary scholarship.

The essential feature of folk literature, i.e., its oral transmission, makes it extremely vulnerable to impermanence, a vulnerability that can be significantly minimized by transcribing it into written form. But before this can be done, the materials need to be collected — and soon. Manuel estimates that of the more or less 100 ethnic groups constituting the Filipino population, not more than 5 percent have fair collections of their oral lore. In Manuel's words,

What we really need is a *pulutong* or *pangkat*, large working groups, this time of harvesters to reap the over-ripening or maturing grain, a great deal of which has already fallen to over-leached ground.

Fortunately, this call — which Manuel has been repeating in Jeremiah fashion for many years now — has not remained unheeded. There is a growing body of scholarship to show that literary scholars are finding, to their surprise and satisfaction, that the proverbs and fables of their forefathers have as much (though of course, not identical) to say to them as the cantos of Ezra Pound or the sonnets of Shakespeare.

Not since the 1930s has there been such prominence given to the social function of literature. It is for this reason that the theme of the seminar was the relation between literature and society. As Lopez points out

It is no longer true that art merely changes within the times and moves only in the shadow of social change. Art and literature can help bring about progress and development. It is now well understood that change is possible only if the objective conditions demand it, and if there exists in men's minds and hearts a subjective readiness and determination to bring it about. This subjective precondition for social change is the realm within which literature has always functioned and which makes it of value to man. It can prepare men for change, can bring about an understanding of why change is necessary, and how it can be brought about.

Theater history in the Philippines confirms the potency of drama as a catalyst for social change. As Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio points out in her paper "The Social Role of Theatre in Asia," the Filipino playwright has been particularly effective in this role.

The liveliest periods of Philippine theatre were those involved in cogent attacks on very specific, very topical issues, from the abuses of the friars to the necessity of driving away the new colonizers, the Americans, from the country; from the ills of the new divorce law to the corruptions of existing political campaigns; from the corrosion caused by the feudal landlordism to the dangers posed by foreign capitalists.

The reason why literature can play such a crucial role in the evolution of a nation is that it is not only a transmitter of values but itself a maker of national myths. In his paper, "Literature as a Maker of National Myth," Maximo Ramos sounds the warning, however, that many myths tend to be motivated by ethnocentrism and therefore liable to abuse as instruments of racism and imperialism. Edith Tiempo echoes that same warning:

Literature as a maker of myth could be a dangerous matter altogether. In this latter role literature is deliberately seen as performing for the state in the production of national values and national guides for conduct. We can see great justification for this expected role of literature, except that a warning seems to be concomitant with it, a warning that has to do with the fact that when a society deliberately sets itself out to "make national myths," it is merely responding to the exigencies of present or anticipated necessities.

Where Ramos and Tiempo chose not to tread, Lopez chooses to stride with unhesitating, though measured, steps:

I have so far spoken of the Filipino writer only in relation to the national society, and you may wonder why I have not spoken of him in relation to the New Society. The reason is quite simple: the New Society is a new concept, the latest phase, if you will, of the power of transformation which goes on endlessly in a dynamic society like our own.

In short, a substantial proportion of our writers, artists and intellectuals have yet to achieve an honest and candid orientation toward the New Society. Some of them are truly disoriented; they have not found their intellectual bearings in the New Society, while others are silent either from conviction or out of an understandable desire not to compromise their personal safety.

Lopez concludes his paper by reminding artists, and by extension, literary scholars, of the awesome responsibility that is theirs by vocation. Quoting from the declaration approved 35 years ago by the First Filipino Writers Conference, Lopez concludes:

Writers are, by the nature of their chosen task, the spearhead of progress. They voice the grievances as well as the aspirations of a nation; they document its achievements; they treasure for posterity the worthwhile efforts of man.

They are the critics of things as they are; they are the dreamers of things as they should be; they cannot escape a large part of the responsibility for the shape of things to come.

Perhaps the ultimate value of seminars such as the PAEF one is not to function as indicators but to occasion the reaffirmation of the delegates' commitment to the exercise of this responsibility.