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Elitism: The Hazards of Being a Vernacular Writer

LEONARD CASPER

NO one familiar with Philippine vernaculars, through study or use, seriously questions any longer their viability or power-potential as media for both daily communication and more durable literary works. This fact is not altered by the reminder of certain scholars that nationalization of the vernaculars has hardly been achieved as yet,¹ for among such persons rarely appears the ill-informed or unduly self-disparaging. Nevertheless, even a language rich in concepts and tangibles can be impoverished by its conventions, its mannerisms, its self-imitativeness, its resistance to tradition seen as a living, developing continuum. It is important that vernacular literature, now irrevocably emergent, be literature of the highest caliber, the largest dimensions of approximate truth realizable in fiction's flesh and blood.

To the extent that these conventions may mirror folkways less and less relevant, in their narrowness, to the growing variety of options available to the modern Filipino; to the extent that the Filipino may decide to be not always the bamboo but sometimes the *baguio*, not the moved but the mover: the serious writer may be forced to suffer a limitation of audience and face charges of elitism from ultranation-

¹ Leopoldo Y. Yabes, "Pilipino Is Not Filipino," *Solidarity*, IV (February 1969), 36-42; Geruncio Lacuesta, *Filipino Versus Pilipino* (National Language Anti-Purism Movement: Quezon City, 1967).

alists, rather than compromise the integrity of what he has to say. He may find himself writing *in the language* of the people-at-large and *about* those same people, but without any hope that many will be his readers.

The unfortunate fact is that the printed word, in Philippine society, is already an elite factor;² and that of all mass media only radio may reach large proportions of the people.³ Nevertheless, if the vernacular writer cannot expect to find a massive audience, still he may settle for the largest audience possible. It is at this point that the degree to which conventions distort his vision and expression must be considered.

These conventions, far from being accidents or whimsical impositions, are allied to the nature of both indigenous languages and society. As members of the Malayo-Polynesian language group, Philippine vernaculars are agglutinative, structured on multiple prefixes, infixes, suffixes, ligatures, and compounds-by-duplication. Constant repetition or internal rhyming are unavoidable and, unless undercut, readily provide the tintinnabulation of an Edgar Allan Poe. The "medium" may distract from, contradict, or even overwhelm the "message," rather than serve as an experiential counterpart or functional mode.

Is there not an element of agglutination in the social structure as well, with its minimization of privacy or individualism, and its orientation toward solidarity as an extension of bilateral kinship and ceremonial *compadrazco*? So formidable are those ancient patterns of obligation that one may wonder if deviation is even tolerable, or originality without ostracism, possible. Is unconventionality by its very nature disruptive of such a

² See Carlos A. Arnaldo, "Philippines Mass Media," *Solidarity*, IV (January 1969), 69-100. Circulation figures, however, are not accompanied by distribution figures, so that one may have to wait for Gloria D. Feliciano's forthcoming *Mass Media Audiences in the Philippines*, in order to estimate the feedback of rural readers on the policy of publishers centralized in urban Luzon and Cebu.

³ That Filipinos are oral-aural-oriented is indicated by their response, for example, to the sound of a horn on the highway but not to sight of a heavy speeding mass itself.

conservative society? But tendencies toward uniformity, in the Philippines, are not that absolute. Perhaps solidarity has been prevented from being identifiable with strict regimentation because it has been tempered by the ideal of mutual consideration and service, even before the immigration of Christianity or Western democracy. Fatalism as well, by leaving the future to chance (providence), undermines any perfection of long-range controls. In any case, however they are to be explained, elements of unpredictability clearly coexist along with patterns of compulsion. Filipinos literally are not lane-drivers or line-walkers, and anarchy is prevented precisely because people are constantly prepared for the unexpected—they anticipate the swerve and realign their own direction with as little show of emotion as possible.

Since flexibility is valued as highly as the spirit of *bayanin* and is not viewed exclusively as a means of achieving the latter, it is worthwhile to survey the past, not in order to reproduce it without question, but, critically, in order to know what constitutes the best, and to excel it; or what, the worst, and to minimize it, as Bienvenido Lumera says Andres Cristobal Cruz manages to do in *Ang Tundo Man, May Langit Din*,⁴ or as habits of circumlocution can generate a form of subtle indirection. An interpersonal (*damay*) society avoids objective, direct criticism wherever possible in order to shield others from *hiya*. This habit, in literature, can lead either to complete evasiveness or to a graceful and suspenseful kind of *tayo* quality eliciting sensitive participation from readers, in order to complete a meaning.

⁴ Although this tentative and partial assessment is the result of some seven months of consulting scores of theses, critical essays, and authors themselves, much of its basic evidence is indebted to the contributions of Bienvenido Lumera in *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Tradition and Literature*, ed. Antonio G. Manuud (Ateneo University Press: Quezon City, 1967); Marcelino A. Foronda, "Dallang: An Introduction to Philippine Literature in Iloko," *Gumil Filipinas*, November 27, 1967, pp. 7, 9, and Francisco Candia, "A Survey of Cebuano Letters," *Philippines International*, X (October 1961), 24-7, 46-9, 52.

Two persistent key elements may be isolated from traditional vernacular literature: the predominance of an *oral tradition* (which assumes a person-to-person interaction, a dialogue-exchange, although expressive language readily deteriorates into word play or the costume of stylized role-playing); and *didacticism* (as in folk riddles designed to communicate, simultaneously, both the limits of information and the limits of mystery; or that ancient Bisayan conduct book, the *Lagda*; or later forms influenced by the Spanish hierarchy's emphasis on indoctrination, rather than guided discovery). These two elements interanimate each other under conditions already analyzed by Lumbera: the loss of *talinhaga* or objective correlates, during the Spanish regime, with a resultant increase in abstraction—either logical oversimplification, or reduction of responsible emotions to irresponsible sentimentality.

The basic dialogue form of the oral tradition seems to have suffered from arrested development, for even as Philippine society grew more complex, its public utterances did not grow equally polyphonic. (They remained at a stage comparable, in a sense, to current "dialogue masses" which are in fact alternations of collective monologue on cue from a monitor, according to rehearsed, invariable patterns.) The *appearance* of spontaneity and ingenuity was valued, but not genuine invention. People receptive to such two-part interplay as the Bisayan courtship ballads (*balitaw*) or repartee arranged to entertain guests at wakes (later the *duplo* or *karagatan*), could also accommodate the mechanics of the *pasion* or *novenas* as easily as they could the *ladino* interlinears. The *carillo* or shadowplay is not substantially different from the *moro-moro* "black-and-white" stereotyping (although there is more literal color and spectacle in the latter) or from Modesto de Castro's *Urbana at Felisa*, whose epistolary format is neatly matched by sharp division of urban-rural values. Similarly, the spirit of indoctrination which assumes that all wisdom is well-worn and needs only to be polished underlies the stock phrases and situations of *awits* and *corridos* and helps to explain the importance given to the quotability of Balagtas' *Florante at Laura*, canonized by 1925 in the brilliant retrieval

system passing for quick wit at poetic jousts known as *balagtasan* (or *crissotan*, after Juan Crisostomo Soto of Pampanga; or *bukanegan*, after Pedro Bukaneg of Ilocos). The arrest in development is made audible in the endless sentimentality and exaggerations and the manneristic style of Leon Pichay's hundreds of coronation verses, honoring Ilokano fiesta queens, or of Zaragoza-Caño's Bisayan poems in praise of womanhood, as well as the *moro-moro* division of antagonists in Max Bas' post-war Bisayan novel, *Girilya Sila* — to name only three writers rendered nearly anonymous by the *deja vu* sameness of their work.

In the twentieth century, the zarzuela was introduced in revolt against *moro-moro* cliches, only shortly to provide fixed formulas of its own. Begun as a "living newspaper and public forum" set to music, the zarzuela—particularly as American administration matured and censorship of actual newspapers diminished — became comic rather than satiric, and hackneyed in its reliance on the generation gap and arranged marriages, or on illegitimacy and other contrived confusions, of relationships. Plots were as multiple and unrelated as those in pre-Shakespearean drama. Sentences were so lavishly aria-like and characterization so incidental to song-provoking situations that the zarzuela's rivalry with traveling Italian operas is self-evident.

[One partial exception is Juan Crisostomo Soto's *Alang Dios* (1902) whose songs at least are soliloquies, dividing characters into private/public selves, without quite anticipating the unconscious levels of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*; and whose plot and subplot are carefully coordinated. In addition, Mena Pecson Crisolago, writing in Iloko, used zarzuela songs to advance characterization, and in *Natakne ng a Panagsalisal* let his lovers be equally heroic, in modification of the *moro-moro* mentality.]

The effect of the zarzuela on drama is epitomized by Piux Kabuhar's two dozen-plus Bisayan plays whose serious intent is lost to overclever or punning dialogue and to onomatopoeia, the combined effect of which is to reduce characters

to caricatures. Kabuhar became notorious for his ability to complete a scenario overnight, directly on the typewriter—a trait that may have led him to the movies later, vernacular movies occasionally being shot without any script at all and resembling a pastiche of clichés when completed.

[Partial exceptions to the zarzuela-corrupted drama must include *Bomba Nyor* (1925), which provides insights into an ambitious politician who tries to abandon a wife with a questionable past; and *Salilang* (1929), whose subject is fraternization at Mactan in the days of Magellan. Both are Bisayan plays by Buenaventura Rodriguez, Kabuhar's predecessor, whose eighteen other vernacular plays tend to be romantic melodramas.]

From this matrix of the arrested oral tradition and of theatricality came the early vernacular novels. Severino Reyes, "Father of the Tagalog Theater," parodied *moro-moros* with *R. I. P.*, and then wrote the zarzuela *Walang Sugat*, which uses friar atrocities as obstacles in a love story of the Revolution, as well as fifty other plays generally as declamatory and predictable as the *moro-moros* he had burlesqued. In addition, Reyes wrote three hundred "Lola Basiang" love-formula tales, as well as four novels which are variations on his plays. For example, *Ang Puso ng Isang Pilipina* (1923) is structured like a three-act melodrama. The novel is almost wholly dialogue and so incredible, because of its lack of full characterization, that the rape of the heroine is usually interpreted allegorically as the rape of the country, although the analogy is put in doubt by her plea that her seducer not be executed because he has become a hero of the Philippine Revolution.

In similar fashion, although on a smaller scale, the first Bisayan novel, *Benjamin* (1908?), betrays the fact that its author, Angel Magahum, was primarily a zarzuelist as well as composer of the first Bisayan opera. Equally visible in Mariano N. Gaerlan's Iloko novels is his preeminence as a zarzuelist and *bukaneguro*. They are virtual metrical romances.

[Exceptions to the list of novels suffering from theatricality would have to include one by Aurelio Tolentino who wrote both Tagalog zarzuelas and dramas before attempting *Ang Buhok ni Ester* in 1914-15, which nevertheless minimizes the melodrama and moralizing typical of plots involving kidnapping, seduction and murder. Similarly, Marcelino Peña Crisologo temporarily escaped from the sacrifice of character to melodrama and coincidence after writing *Mining* (1914) in Iloko, by creating in *Pinang* (1915) a less virtuous but more aggressively active woman capable of the avarice which is her passion.]

If Philippine literature is sometimes too *dulce*, too prone to sweet self-indulgence, to be taken seriously, it is also sometimes too *utile*, too didactic and editorializing to permit the full embodiment of person provided by narrative technique. For example, the fifty-three stories in Bisayan written by nationalist Vicente Sotto, mainly in Hong Kong exile between 1907 and 1911 but collected as *Mga Sugilanong Pilipinhon* in 1929 are really sketches, betraying a journalist's tendency to caricature or to let the intrinsic importance of subject matter substitute for subtlety of insight. Person and ramification of theme are simplified and further diffused by a sometimes florid, sometimes ranting style. The historical value of these works as social documents aside, their principal literary value is reduced to idiomatic wit and quotability.

Occasionally works can suffer from both defects—sentimentality and an excess of proselytizing—simultaneously. In Lope K. Santos' *Banaag at Sikat* (1906) most of the chapters dwell on a romantic/pathetic formula not unlike the one which reappears in his ten later novels or his twelve volumes of verse. The remaining few chapters are manifestoes reminiscent of W. D. Howells at his worst, or of Santos' admirer, Juan Laya, or of Edilberto Tiempo's *Watch in the Night* (the polemical essay's interruption of narrative enactment is not the exclusive property of any nation or language). The realism of *Banaag at Sikat* is constricted by clichés, side issues and asides, preclassification of characters according to economic

type, tedious repetitions, and the sacrifice of clarity of argument to sound-play.

The flaws of *Banaag at Sikat* may also be accounted for by its installment presentation, which encouraged Santos to delay the writing of later chapters until the first ones had already appeared. Thus his manuscript was open to revision at one end only, and Santos succumbed to carelessness permissive of contradictions.

Serialization, in the case of Roman Reyes' periodic novels, appears to have reinforced a predisposition in the author visible in his translation into Tagalog of Pedro Paterno's *Ninay* (a novel that might better be called a "sketch book"). Reyes' faulty sense of continuity — and certainly of dramatic development—is revealed in numerous anticlimaxes, character inconsistencies, artificial suspense, excessive reliance on coincidence, and the use of summary treatises for ideological stress.

[An instructive example of how serialization can be counteracted may be seen in Valeriano Hernandez y Peña's *Si Nena at Si Neneng* (1905). Although known as the "Father of the Tagalog Novel" presumably because he contributed a dozen of the earliest long works he deserves to be remembered as the author of one novel which escaped picaresque form, if not the temptation to moralize. *Si Nena at Si Neneng* is structured not on serial division but on five sequential, interlocked love triangles based on three intimate couples; as well as on the constant camaraderie of Nena and Neneng.

[Less successfully, the early Hiligaynon novels of Magdalena Jalandoni, *Ang mga Tunuc sang Isa ca Bulac* (1910) and *Ang Bantay Sang Patyo* (1925), tried to offset diffusion by telescoping one story within another, as if in imitation of *Wuthering Heights*' formal dimensions.]

The perishability of vernacular literature in the Philippines is caused, in part, by its tendency to appear exclusively in commercial magazines whose satisfaction of mass tastes and expectations makes these magazines admittedly non-literary; whose concern therefore is not with reprinting in more per-

manent form even those examples worthy of survival. An extreme but revealing case is that of Miss Jalandoni's three best novels (her own assessment) which, exceeding three hundred pages apiece, fell outside the specifications of the vernacular press and therefore remained cached in her Iloilo home until their destruction during liberation.

[Despite the lack of reprints, periodical literature still could be made accessible, were universities to collect and bind the more significant magazines. However, although universities are a proper place for the careful study of culture and for discernment of the usable past and present, too few such institutions even teach Philippine literature — in any language — seriously; and far less bother to collect "Filipiniana." Sometimes courses have been scheduled before discovery is made that the students lack sufficient published materials for them to handle and scrutinize individually. Amado Hernandez' novel, *Luha ng Buwaya*, is only one case in point. After preliminary successful appearance in *Taliba* and despite the author's having already won the Cultural Heritage Award for Literature, in 1963 it was "published" by Ayuda in a mimeographed edition of only two hundred and fifty copies, for college use.]

Tradition is assumed to be organic, to be designed so that the principle of adaptability and experimentation can be preserved. Discrimination, leading to selection and to *conservation* of the values and value-vehicles, is ultimately an act of *liberation*. But the instinct to conserve can also be destructive where sheer habit, cultural inertia, lacks critical consciousness and therefore the ability to redefine goals and directions. Then a society becomes the prey of chauvinists whose proclamation that "Whatever is, is right — provided it is mine" is as dangerous as the colonialist attitude that "whatever is mine is inferior." Literary conventions (such as those too briefly exemplified here: many minds' slow convergence would be required for more definitive analyses) become, for the uncritical, the touch-me-nots, the *noli me tangeres*, of their time.

But the Philippines is not a regimented society; just as there have been lively dissenters earlier in the century, twist-

ing the tail of taboos, so have there been notable ones in the past twenty-five years. Among them must be numbered those writers with reputations in English who, during the Japanese Occupation, wrote in the vernacular for *Liwayway* and *Taliba* which, then being subsidized as semi-official organs, could afford to make their editorial policy less restrictive. When this monopoly ended in the postwar period, several writers returned to English—for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that the vernacular magazines became relatively conventional again. Of course, not all vernacular writers could remain unaffected. To set at least rudimentary standards through a constant exchange of their experience as craftsmen, the Tagalog writers' group, Panitikan, had already been formed in 1935, and several of its members participated in the symbolic public burning of escapist works in 1940. A new generation of writers organized their dissatisfactions and aspirations into the Kadipan, in 1950. Similarly, during the 1950's, the Cebu Writers' Guild was established in partial reaction to the policies of *Bisaya* magazine; and a decade later *Ludabi* (Lubasang Dagang Binisaya) came into being, in order to dissociate writers from exploitation for political or religious ends. In a parallel move against *Bannawag's* tendency to revise stories so that a uniform style and subject matter could be presented, writers in Iloko founded GUMIL in 1966.

From such insurgents and resurgence has come a growing number of excellent Tagalog anthologies of fiction and poetry, including the remarkable short story collection *Agos sa Diyerto* (1965), introduced by Lumbera in *Brown Heritage*. These can be matched in quality, if not yet in number, by *Lubasan* (1967), a collection of *Bisaya* award winners, 1957-65; and GUMIL's *Napili a Sarita dagiti Ilokano* (1968). Since 1950, there have also been annual Palanca awardees in Tagalog, although less than one-third have been collected and republished so far.

Palanca has also made annual presentations to the best Tagalog one-act plays although for years this honor prevented staging of the play unless an author "pirated" his

own work! Severino Montano's Arena Theater has succeeded in bringing a few vernacular plays to the barrios in the last fifteen years, and in encouraging the writing of such plays. The related effort of the University of the Philippines Mobile Theater, under Wilfredo Ma. Guerrero's direction, has been satisfied with a small repertory (largely Guerrero's own plays) and with training actors rather than stimulating playwrights or awakening rural audiences. A higher quality of dramatic writing and production, although beyond the reach of peasant or typical proletarian, has been provided by PETA's performance of translated Filipino plays at Fort Santiago and by *Balintataw*, winner of several CAT awards.

In poetry the principal group breakthrough has come from Bagay Poets such as Rolando Tinio and Jose Lacaba, to whom Lumbera has called attention.

Creative unconventionalism has also resulted from such individual efforts, in Tagalog, as Cruz' serialized *Ang Tundo Man, May Langit Din* (1959-60); in Bisaya, as the disregard of Spanish accentual prescriptions in the prewar poems of Vicente Ranudo or in the short-lined *siniloy* experiments of Diosdado Alesna, and in the adaptation of stream-of-consciousness in Godofredo Roperos' novel, *Paghupa sa Kangitngit*; in Iloko, by Godofredo Reyes and Jeremias Calixto's poetic innovations in the 1950's, Constante Casabar's novel treatment of discrimination against Ilokanos in Manila and of political kickbacks in Ilocos Sur, represented respectively in *Puris iti Barukong* and *Dagiti Mariung iti Parlongon*, and Alejandrino Hufana's recent short lyrics.

Experimentation is, understandably, highest in intensity on campuses rather than in popular media. There, above all, exists the challenge to teaching as indoctrination and to the concept of literature as sacred codes of conduct or passing entertainment (although no one would prevent history, theology or sociology courses, for example, from using subliterary types as social documents). Courses in regional/national literatures are slowly increasing (Foundation College in Dumaguete introduced the first course in Cebuano litera-

ture, in 1968); hopefully they will be taught critically and always at least as much in literary as in nationalistic terms. The number and quality of graduate theses on Philippine literature have increased impressively over the past fifteen years, although these theses come from a select few institutions: U.P., U.S.T., Centro Escolar, Silliman, and the University of San Carlos, and rarely are most of these theses ever read, despite the fact that a number deserves publication. The Ateneo University Press has begun an excellent series of volumes in or on the vernaculars; the National Library has monumental plans for reprinting past works—perhaps in conjunction with the Philippine Book Guild or with the announced Marcos Awards in Vernacular Literature which would permit and reward a non-divisive diversity, by recognizing regional literatures; and the U.P. Press has begun to show interest also in vernacular works. On at least two campuses—University of the East and Manuel L. Quezon University—multivernacular anthologies are in process of collection and annotation. On some campuses, notably at Silliman and the University of San Carlos, workshops exist which provide writers with the kind of close, prepublication reaction which has allowed many Visayans, translating their own works into English, to flood the pages of the *Philippines Free Press*, *Weekly Nation*, and other Manila magazines.

While it is true that campus writers, even in the “language of the people,” can address themselves to coteries or, on occasion, be totally private and incommunicado or create fantasies and language-styles utterly divorced from life-at-large—while it is true that campus writers can construct a body of rigid, self-serving conventions among themselves, that risk may be one which has to be taken in order to allow more broadly relevant and more generative trials to be attempted. The risk is somewhat lessened by the current practice of publishing in student magazines varieties of non student fiction; and it might be further lessened, could KAMPI or some similar supracollegiate group circulate existing campus magazines or provide one periodical outlet for all; the potential audience

among college students and alumni, then, would hardly be negligible or esoteric.

What the history of Philippine literature demonstrates is that, despite a preponderance of formulas and clichés and meaningless collective mannerisms, exceptions have often occurred. These exceptions, current or past, create a tradition more viable than the one which is convention disguised. They serve as one open end in a society with many enclosures; they represent the relative few possessed of a "change-readiness."

This minority group may coincide, in many ways, with the middle-class, English-oriented group characterized by Petronilo Bn. Daroy in his Urian lecture. If so, it may be forced to defend itself against the same charges of elitism, or narrow interests, or dilettante commitment.⁵ Whether or not such economic "middle class" can be as clearly identified in twentieth century Europe, there undoubtedly is describable a third

⁵ Partly in overcompensation for condescension which, formerly, they may have sensed in the advocates of Philippine literature in English, the vernaculars' adherents sometimes anticipate a time when such work can be dismissed as temporary aberrations in the recovery of national culture. Such a loss, however, would only confirm the perishability of Philippine arts. Several authors in English can best be appreciated not in terms of class divisions so much as in terms of a larger social awareness. They share with vernacular writers the Filipino Dream of solidarity combined with service; yet they know also the common Filipino Experience, of the imperfection of attempts to belong to one another. Their literature is replete not with complacency but with images of loss, betrayal, exile, discontinuousness. What does vary is the technique and substance of their vision: whether the Pinoy's homesickness and subsequent disillusionment, or the crazy-mirror effects of a *Villa Magdalena*, a house in collapse; the difficult mutual dependency of *kainginero* and the soil against an exploitative system, or the *tinikling* evasiveness of *The Bamboo Dancers*; the conflict of heritages provoked by an archetypal painting, or the collective search for completion among individuals with too many navels. So various are such acts of the creative imagination and so constitutive of a genuine, if unselfconscious, *literature of protest* (in which both terms stay in proper balance) that, far from being decried, the works of Gonzalez, Joaquin, Santos and any another should be carried by some dutiful Aeneas carefully and respectfully into every Filipino language.

or middle force of restless people somewhere between the inert masses and the stand-pat oligarchy. Far from being the bourgeois conservatives discoverable in certain societies, perhaps in the Philippines they are the very "risk people" whose "venture capital" is the widening of their consciousness as they begin to encounter degrees of mobility or to observe that flexibility can be active as well as passive. If income is relative to this middle group at all, it may be in the sense that such persons are no longer in mortal, cumulative debt and, therefore, for the first time can contemplate a future, a range of choices. Are such citizen-artists not likely also to be socially conscious rather than class-conscious, as their expectations rise; and does this inclination not multiply the impact of their vision, regardless of the compactness of their numbers?

In any case, it would be unfortunate if this minority had to apologize for elitism when the very nature of literature lifts it above the commonplace, the mediocre. For other writers there are other media, with their own values and rewards: advertising, news analysis, political hack work, textbooks, comic books, letters to the editor, pamphleteering, literary histories....