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## The Heroic Age in Philippine Literature

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## Review Articles

### *The Heroic Age in Philippine Literature\**

**I**T would be curious to inquire whether any nation has ever developed a great literature without some kind of heroic age which is the chief subject of that literature. It would seem that some kind of heroic age is needed as a focus of national awareness, a shared experience that has helped to unify the nation, bringing various tribes or clans together (which had been separated by mountain or sea or war) and forging them into one people. Such a heroic age need not actually have existed; it could be merely imagined, like the legendary age of Siegfried and the Valkyrie; but it should be an age which must be truly heroic, a time of great stress when all the qualities of a people are tested, bringing out the best and the worst in man.

In Greece it was the Fall of Troy, with the ten years' war that preceded and the incredible wanderings that followed. So dominant was the memory of that great age that not even Salamis or Marathon or the exploits of Alexander could erase it, and even the alien Romans, who had a heroic age of their own (for instance, the Punic Wars), felt compelled to link the founding of their city with the Fall of Troy.

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\* MORE THAN CONQUERORS. By Edilberto K. Tiempo. Manila: Pedro B. Ayuda and Company, 1964. vi, 110 pp.

THE VOLCANO. By Bienvenido Santos. Quezon City: Poenix Publishing House, 1965. 375 pp.

In Russia it was the Napoleonic invasion. In France it was the time of Charlemagne. In Spain it was the long struggle to push back the Mohammedan invasion. The struggle lasted several centuries, and it produced a great literature, with the *Cid* at one end and *Don Quixote* at the other.

Perhaps one reason why English literature has been so varied and so fecund is the fact that England has had, not one, but many heroic ages. There was (to begin with) the age of Arthur; then the age of Alfred; the Norman Conquest; the age of Becket; the Great Plague; the Crusades; the Wars of the Roses; the Elizabethan Age; the Puritan Revolution; the age of Wellington and Nelson; the age of Empire; the age of Churchill.

The United States, in its relatively short history, has had a triple heroic age. One was the colonial period—an age of discovery and settlement, of log cabins and Indian wars and savage witch-hunts, an era ending in a great Revolution when “embattled farmers” became a national army. The second was the winning of the West, when the frontier was pushed farther and farther back by heroes and villains whose exploits and whose villainies have caught the imagination of even today’s children. And the third heroic age of America was the Civil War.

In the Philippines, though we have not yet produced a great literature, we also have had a triple heroic age out of which such a literature could be written. One was the pre-Spanish, pre-Christian era, when good and evil fought fiercely for the soul of these islands; when malignant spirits hid in every rock and tree; when every brave was a *Malakás* and every maiden a *Magandá*. This was an age of invasions, when Malayan settlers came in their *barangays* from Borneo and elsewhere to settle in the various islands, pushing the dark-skinned aborigines back to the hills. It was also the age of the Mohammedan invasion, and later of the Spanish conquest, the age of Magellan and Legazpi, of Lapulapu and Soliman. That heroic age was the subject of our primitive epics and legends. It was probably the memory of such an age that gave popularity to the *moro-moro* and the *corrido*.

Our second heroic age was the long colonial era with its color and its gloom, its heroisms and villainies, the grandeur of a walled city and the insurrections of a captive people. It was the age of the Galleon, the period of the Dutch Wars, and of the Moro piracies. It was also an age of terrible executions of men like Burgos and Rizal. It ended in two bloody revolutions, one against Spain, the other against America. From that great era we have the ephemeral writings of the Propaganda Movement, and the less ephemeral, more permanent creations of Rizal. That great heroic age, and its impact (or lack of impact) upon the present, is the subject of much of Nick Joaquin's writings.

We have also had a third heroic age, and it was as great a time of testing as any nation in history has experienced. It began with the Japanese invasion of the Philippines in December 1941 and continued through three and a half years of Japanese occupation. It ended with the return of the American troops and the battles for liberation—which were among the most bitterly fought and most destructive battles in all history, Asian or European. Two things stand out in particular during that terrible time of national travail. One was the Death March from Bataan to Capaz. The other was the slow attrition of the guerrilla movement, when the most determined efforts of Japanese cruelty could not break the stubborn resistance of a people at war.

That was certainly a heroic age, worthy of song and story. It has begun to produce a growing body of literature. Some of this literature is clumsy. Much of it is trivial, or for other reasons unworthy of the great subject. Some of it is intensely moving, and some of it is humorous. It is hoped that, eventually, some great work of imaginative art will be written to do justice to the grandeur and the horror of that era.

The horror (if not the grandeur) of that era has been depicted by Stevan Javellana in his well-titled novel, *Without Seeing the Dawn*. Some of the horror is also reflected (though less successfully) in *This Barangay*, by Juan Cabrereros Laya. Some of the humor of the war-years may be seen in Celso Carunungan's *Like a Big Brave Man*.

## MORE THAN CONQUERORS

"More than Conquerors" is the title of Dr. Edilberto K. Tiempo's second novel about the last war. The first (which has already been reviewed in these pages) bore a double title: in the Philippine edition it was called *Watch in the Night*; in the American paperback edition it was renamed *Cry Havoc*. That was not an entirely successful venture. This second novel—*More than Conquerors*—is less ambitious in scope, more limited in action; but it creates a more transcendent vision. It is in this latter novel that the full horror of the war is revealed.

The story is laid in Mindanao. After the fall of Bataan a newspaper editor and a few of his trusted workers take a portable printing press to the hills and hide it in the earth under a millstone. Every week by the light of a lantern they remove the millstone, bring up the press and type-case, set up type and print a weekly newspaper. The hiding place of the printing press is never discovered by the Japanese, but one of the workers is captured, along with his two brothers. They are marched into the town and are thrown into separate cells. "Holes" would be a better word: for in each cell are many men, left to rot in darkness and in the filth of their own urine and excreta. Twice a day a tiny window is opened to hand in their food; and at night one window is opened high up near the ceiling to let in air. The prisoners who are strong enough to do so take turns in hoisting each other up and, standing on each other's shoulders, to catch a breath of the fresh air blowing in from the sea.

From that dark hole the prisoners are sometimes taken out to be tortured, to make them reveal the hiding places of the guerrillas and other secret information. The different kinds of torture are described in detail. Their savagery may seem unbelievable to those who know nothing of Japanese brutality. Those who were in the Philippines during the Japanese Occupation can testify that Dr. Tiempo does not exaggerate. Many people were tortured, and many died, in precisely the ways that he has described.

Sometimes, to break down a person's resistance, he himself is not physically tortured but is made to watch while a brother or some other member of his family is tortured. The torture can last two days. The victim is suspended spread-eagle upon stakes in the broiling sun. No food or drink is given despite the victim's pleas for the love of God to finish him off.

In such an atmosphere of brutal cruelty, it is not surprising that many will think only of themselves, to save their own skin. But there are cases, among the prisoners or among others (and sometimes among the Japanese soldiers themselves), where a person will risk his own torture or even death to save another from pain or to give him a chance to escape.

Such is the terrible tale of the war-years that Dr. Tiempo tells. It is a black tale, enlivened by humanity and heroism. He gives his narrative a theological dimension by the presence in the dark dungeon of a prisoner who had at one time studied in a Protestant seminary. He had never become a minister as he had been expelled in his senior year for having gotten a woman with child. But he had stayed long enough in the seminary to learn many passages from the Bible by heart. Here, in the darkness and stench of this foul prison, these passages come back to him. Afraid of losing his mind, he tests his memory by reciting aloud these passages from Scripture. The words speak of hope and love and courage, and they give a vision of a life beyond the grave. That vision glows in this foul prison like "a light shining in darkness". There is, for instance, the passage from St. John which in Dickens' novel gives strength to Sidney Carton; "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in Me, although he be dead, shall live." There is also the passage from St. Paul which provides the title to the novel: "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors in Him that loves us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth nor any other creature, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord."

Dr. Tiempo's novel is fiction. But it gives a true picture of the war—its horror and its grandeur. It also gives a true picture of human life.

#### THE VOLCANO

Another novel about the war, also published recently, is entitled *The Volcano* by Bienvenido Santos.

Strictly speaking, it is not a war-novel at all. The war is merely an episode in the story, and all the fighting occurs off-stage. The main characters are non-combatants, and the story consists, not so much in what they do, as in what happens to them. It is (so to speak) a drama, not of action, but of passion—in the Aristotelian sense.

The real subject of Santos' novel is not the war but the Americans in the Philippines who were caught by the war, and whose lives were radically affected by the war and its aftermath. The protagonist is an American Protestant missionary (Dr. Hunter) who, with his wife and two children, is sent by his church to the Bicol Peninsula to replace another American missionary whose work has been largely ineffective. Being also a physician, Dr. Hunter decides to set up a mission hospital which gradually gains acceptance among people who (being ignorant) are initially afraid of hospitals, and who (being Catholics) do not trust a Protestant missionary.

Dr. Hunter and his hospital render valuable service during an eruption of Mayon volcano. The Japanese invasion obliges him to close down the hospital and to go into hiding with his wife and daughter. In their hiding place, they enjoy the hospitality of a Filipino couple and their son, who have, all these years, served as the missionaries' assistants.

Two complications arise with regard to the Hunters' two children. Their son ("Junior") has become a close friend of their hosts' elder son (Tito), and when Tito is drafted into the Philippine army, Junior, though an American, insists on joining up as a Filipino. He dies as a guerrilla fighter. Their daughter, on the other hand, falls in love with their hosts' younger son (Badong). The Hunters have apparently no dif-

ficulty in accepting Filipino hospitality during the war, but they find it difficult to accept a Filipino son-in-law—even if the prospective son-in-law is one who has risked his life (and lost one eye) to protect theirs. The Hunters, however, accept the inevitable, and the marriage takes place. After the war, when the Hunters are eventually repatriated, the Filipino husband is left behind, consoled with the thought that the separation from his wife may be only temporary.

From his hiding place in the hills, Dr. Hunter is able to render medical assistance to other evacuees; in particular to a wealthy Spanish merchant (Don Vicente) who is an atheist and a libertine, but who has a quixotic sense of charity and compassion for the needs of others. Unable to stand his repeated infidelity, his wife commits suicide; but he marries another, much younger, wife, to whom he is faithful after his fashion. After a miscarriage, Dr. Hunter informs Don Vicente and his wife that another pregnancy would be fatal, and insists on the use of artificial contraceptives which Dr. Hunter will prescribe. Being a Catholic, the lady finds the suggestion revolting, but yields at last to the Protestant missionary's insistence.

At the end of the war, the Hunters are rescued by American troops and they reopen their mission hospital. But life is not the same. Their son has died in the guerrilla fighting. Their daughter, contrary to their wishes, is married to a Filipino whose education has been drastically curtailed by the war. The Doctor himself and his wife are old. Worst of all, they are no longer treated with the old respect and consideration to which they have become accustomed. They are openly derided as Americans, and their house is often stoned at night. The Philippines have become an independent Republic, and Americans are apparently no longer wanted.

The Hunters, in their selfless devotion to their mission, have not provided for such an eventuality. They have collected many knickknacks, but no real possessions of great monetary worth. They have made no money, and their friends in the United States have all died or are as old as themselves. They have become rooted to the land like native Filipinos,

and yet are not accepted as natives. They again accept the inevitable, pack up a few belongings, give away the rest, and they leave their adopted country to face a bleak future in their native land.

That, in brief, is the story in *The Volcano*.

From this bare summary, one can see that there are a number of themes in the narrative which are potentially explosive. It is a virtue of Mr. Santos' treatment that no explosions occur. Everything is treated with detachment and with restraint.

An even greater virtue is the symbolic treatment implied in the title. "The Volcano" refers, primarily, to Mount Mayon, that magnificent mountain which is one of the most beautiful in the world. Described as a perfect cone (by all except those who have tried to climb it), it dominates the harbor of Legazpi and the entire province of Albay, where the events of this story take place. The volcano thus serves as a geographical anchor. This is a story that could not possibly take place in New York or Paris or Iowa or Spain. It could have happened, with certain modifications, in other parts of the Philippines. But primarily and distinctively, this story belongs in the Bicol Peninsula, not far from the city of Legazpi and under the shadow of that great volcano.

Besides serving as a geographical landmark, the volcano has also a symbolic function. For this great mountain is ambivalent: it is beautiful and destructive. It exhibits an almost feminine beauty when at rest; it is a masculine titan in its fury. It thus lends itself to symbolic uses as an ambivalent symbol of beauty and destructiveness, of peace and war.

Santos, however, is too sophisticated a craftsman to let matters rest there. He goes beyond these obvious connotations and uses the mountain to symbolize something less obvious: namely, the corrosion of human relations under the strain of great hardships, or under the lesser but more insidious strain of daily living. The novelist calls attention to this symbolic use of the mountain by quoting, as an epigraph, the following passage from a scientific work on volcanology: "Mount Ma-

yon . . . assumes a smooth form when newly coated with ash after an eruption, but soon becomes deeply furrowed as enormous consequent gullies are cut in the fine and relatively impermeable ash . . . Such furrowing of ash slopes generally begins with the first rain."

Mr. Santos goes still further. In a splendid opening chapter, he presents the reader with two symbols. The first is the great mountain itself, the real Mayon, which is nature's own handiwork. The other is an imitation mountain, made in the image of Mayon by an American schoolboy (the son of Dr. Hunter), who insists on living like a Filipino and who dies in the attempt. His toy-volcano survives him as his only memorial, a puny, fragile reminder of a noble and fragile attempt.

Unfortunately, the rest of the book does not live up to the expectations raised by that magnificent chapter. The reader's interest, raised to a high pitch in Chapter 1, and sustained, after a fashion, in Chapters 2 and 3, begins to flag soon afterwards. The remainder of the book is not without interest, but it is read from a sense of duty. That is of course a defect common to many novels, even great ones: but it is a triumph of the novelist's art when his reader, having begun the tale, reads it through to the end because he cannot put the book down.

This is not to say that Mr. Santos' novel is devoid of good points. It bristles with good points. One delightful incident, described with sardonic humor, is the annual declamation contest at which Dr. Hunter is a judge. Anyone who has witnessed such contests in the provinces will read the passage with amusement.

But no amount of good points—or of good passages—can create a living tale. Mr. Santos' *Volcano*, for all its good points, somehow fails to come alive.

One difficulty is the fact that the novelist does not really get inside his characters. The American missionary doctor and his wife are described sympathetically, but from the outside. The doctor cuts a noble figure: benign, paternal, self-sacrificing. He is patient under trial. He is tolerant. He is

efficient. But, except for his initial repugnance to his daughter's marrying a Filipino, we do not really know what he is thinking. How does it feel to be a Protestant missionary in a Catholic country? How does one justify one's attempts to convert, not non-Christians to Christianity, but Catholics to Protestantism? Does he not feel a moral scruple when he insists that a Catholic woman should use artificial contraceptives, against the dictates of her conscience? How does a Protestant missionary, versed in Scripture, and committed to the principle of private interpretation of Scripture bring himself to deny to Catholics the right to condemn artificial birth-control as a repetition of the sin of Onan?

Such thoughts would occur to a thinking man, which presumably Dr. Hunter is: but there is no indication that he is bothered by any moral scruples or hesitations.

The result is a character seen from a distance. Many things happen externally to the Hunters; but nothing really happens to them internally. They remain basically the same when they leave the country as when they arrived. There has been little interior illumination. There has been no interior crisis nobly overcome. They are, in many respects, admirable, but hardly interesting, and their story is ultimately trivial.

The same lack of realization is true of most of the other characters. The American boy ("Junior") who desires so much to become a Filipino would be an extremely interesting character if he were made more real: as it is, he must be taken largely on faith. So must his chum (Tito), the Filipino lad who detests Americans but is the closest friend of one. He too is a potentially interesting character: as a schoolboy he refuses to become a Protestant convert; as a guerilla fighter he refuses to surrender; later on (we are told) he becomes something of a political intriguer. But we really don't know. We are *told* a few things about him: but the character itself does not come to life.

There is, however, one character in the book that does come to life. This is Don Vicente, the Spanish merchant,

partly saint and partly sinner. Mr. Santos in his short stories has created some memorable characters: Don Vicente is of their number.

Another serious defect in the novel is the seemingly unexplained change of attitude on the part of the Filipinos toward the American Protestant missionary. Before Independence, the American missionary doctor is respected. After Independence, his house is stoned and he is spoken of in derision. Just like that. All, seemingly, as a result of independence.

But things don't happen that way in real life—at least, not in the Philippines that this reviewer knows. Filipinos often act illogically, but hardly irrationally. Filipinos don't often stone the houses of aliens. Certainly they don't stone the houses of Americans who have lived with them for two decades. If they do, it is the result of extreme emotional provocation, because of something (real or imagined) that the foreigner has done or failed to do.

Finally, there is one defect that must be mentioned, though it is with regret that one feels compelled to mention it. One passage—brief, unnecessary, which a good editor could have deleted—is in incredibly bad taste.

Such are some of the defects. But the virtues are many. The language (except for an occasional awkwardness) is easy and unstrained. There is no overwriting—a common fault in our literature. The mood is quiet. The tone is one of gentle humor. Mr. Santos, whose reputation is securely established as a short story writer, is a careful and sophisticated craftsman. More and better novels may be expected from his pen.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD