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The Log Across the Trail

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The Log Across the Trail: Language and Literature in the Philippines

NVM Gonzalez



So we've come this far! But consider this: asprawl amidst the second growth and brush farther down the trail lies an obstacle, the bole of a *lauan*, lichen-wrapped and vine-garlanded. It is five arm's-lengths in diameter and too formidable even for the foolhardy, given the spread of branches and leaves still green and thick, and broken twigs every which way demanding respect and attention. Better that you clear a path around; for, otherwise, how are you to move on?

No place in the world has been spared of imperialism. Today, even with all but a few colonies sundered loose, it prevails upon land and sea. Time is grace and disgrace wherever you turn. Its institutions are legion; its values, earthworm-like, undergo continual regeneration, estopped as if by natural right from decline, decay or death. Of colonization, a phenomenon where imperialism manifests itself so patently, we have quite so historied an experience as Filipinos; the nation, in a manner of speaking, emerged out of its womb. It may well be that from crib to mound or crypt our modes of feeling and thinking as colonials shall endure.

Belinda Olivares Cunanan, in *Political Tidbits* for 31 December 1992, may have caught the illusion of health and vigor engendered in the observer of the Philippine scene, when she wrote:

Wherever I go around the country, I can feel the inexorability of the march of peace and unity. If I may draw an analogy, it's pretty much like the sensation one feels in a Tokyo subway train during rush hour: whether you like it or not, the avalanche of humanity will push you out (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 31 Dec. 1992, p. 5).

This is the milieu after three successive colonizations, a couple of global wars, and a bloodless people-power revolution that relieved the nation of a home-grown dictatorship. The imperial blessings it received nearly all through the duration did not allow it, paradoxi-

cally enough, a long life. There has been for today's Filipino, in any event, enough stressful history to justify his seeking the best possible world that there is to find.

A farm in Bulacan appealed to Mr. Jose G. Burgos as his deserved retreat, where he would put behind him the generic good fight against the Marcos regime. A journalist now turned gentleman farmer, he would regale us with a list of "pleasurable" delights, such as

Walking up to cock's crow and bird song.
Eating *pan de sal* filled with sweet coco jam.
Drinking *barako* coffee with carabao's milk.
Dropping off to sleep lulled by a concert of cicadas and dragon flies.

And, on a full moon, looking up at the sky and thanking God for the blessings of a day just over. (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 31 December 1992, p. 5)

There are millions of us town- and city-bound, held captive by employment, commitments, compromises and accommodations, and thus must hack it out. Our kind read Mr. Max Soliven and yield to the chill running down our backs whenever he reminds us what living in Metro Manila these days comes down to:

When there's no electricity, it's lights out. But when people are insecure about their lives, let alone their property, then it's goodnight. (*Philippine Star*, 6 Oct. 1992, p. 6)

Empire-bashing, whether too late or taken up anew, is not good manners. But who can help it if despite all civility, engrained or otherwise, you are confronted by our sizable log across the trail? Sun and rain may have just about shredded off a few more the leaves; the trunk, though, remains intact and as lichen-covered as before, suggesting an appropriate emblem for the cautions and travail of decolonization.

The Problem of English

One particularly large protuberance may have served well some earlier rider who tethered his horse to it, to rest there awhile before continuing on his journey. This was where perhaps he was heart-sick by the state of the nation and came to pondering on, say, the

decline in the sentiments that inform the national language problem. For we fell for the notion that to be united as a people, to achieve progress, etc., we needed a language of our own. During the twenties, while hanging around the tracks, we bought the nag; it would probably be suitable for cantering about the paddocks of free nations.

Had we looked around, we might have realized that we did not only have one language but several. Had we come to some such awareness as this about our resources and then arrived at a language policy that would be more informed by popular usage and consensus than by statutes and bureaucratic management, we might by now be doing as well as Indonesia with Bahasa Indonesia. What we have come up with is a free-wheeling bilingualism as yet quite unarticulated with our national life. Our *de facto* lingua franca is irremediably Taglish, Mix-mix to some observers. Five minutes of listening time before a Metro Manila TV screen is all you need to realize that people prefer to be on their own rather than dictated to by law as to which language to use. Our public officials are comfortably at home in Taglish, offering as it does a range of expression from the vulgar to the sublime. But the legitimization of Taglish, however, is unthinkable; it would play as a betrayal of imperial experience, a rejection of the myth of the Thomasites, and given the best of possible constructions, a disavowal of Manifest Destiny.

A visit to Dylan Thomas's country, the Wales of his wondrous poems, acquainted me with a reality about language and society. It was 1965, and I was in Rome that year, on a writing fellowship. Came the Christmas season and from the poet Vernon Watkins I received a gem of a greeting card—in Welsh. My opportunity, I thought, to check on a notion I had concerning the relation of the Welsh language to English—namely, that this was not unlike that of Tagalog to the English brought to the Philippines by the Thomasites.

My visit revealed on the spot, as it were, how careers in poetry might be pursued with pride and passion, and how poets might remain in their realm of activity. Had Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins stoked the fires of nationalism by composing in Cymraeg we would not have their work to hand. But Vernon Watkins confessed to a limited Cymraeg; he could render into English no more than half the message in his greeting card. And Dylan Thomas did not, in fact, command Welsh at all (McArthur 1992, 1108).

He wove its rhythms into his poetry in English, though; this is, admittedly, the main sources of his virtuosity, but he is not lacking in detractors who point to his borrowing as the reason for his lack

of content and needless obscurity. This criticism is difficult to take, especially when said of a poet whose lines, in your humble estimation, are additions to a reality about land and sea, about family and the generations at the cutting edge of an age of empire in disarray—as Rudyard Kipling's were supplements to imperial power in full play.

If nothing else, it is a hazardous voyage you undertake when navigating between cultures. An experienced seafarer is the Nobel prize Caribbean poet Derek Walcott. He observed in 1988,

You start off as a colonial writer, you get promotion to Commonwealth writer, West Indian writer, then may be to the international club by the people who run this thing called English literature. The horrific thing for them is that English literature is out of their control. (McArthur 1992, 1108)

The recently published *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, edited by Tom McArthur, is a treasury of information on how writers fare once embarked upon that voyage. They become inexorably part of the imperial narrative. The *Companion* above-mentioned lists a chronology of the spread of the English language throughout the world from Roman times to 1990, hence it becomes no irrelevance to note how only sixteen years separate the birth date of James Joyce and the annexation by the United States of the Philippines, our official entry into the history of the hegemony. The chronology ends with the publication in 1989 of the monumental *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language*, its supplements included. Should our being taken notice of in this way warm the cockles of the *provinciano* heart?

Language militants have minds of their own, and if you were Welsh you might join the Welsh nationalist movement with so-called limited law-breaking (i.e., tearing up street signs in English). Or get trapped in compromises and accommodations, such as attended the language problems of India; you read about a "three language formula," "link languages," "library languages," and "literary languages"—an entire mess of terms and schemes, in short (McArthur 1992, 504), all indicative of what Derek Walcott has hinted at: that *de facto* controller over literature, at work somewhere, somehow. An entry in the *Companion* deals with Taglish and defines "the Philippine continuum between full English and full Tagalog," as "English, Taglish, Engalog, Tagalog." All a jolly read!

But wait: an in-depth exposition and narrative of the play of imperial hegemonies and language, and the cultural structures that imperialism has built over time, for that matter, are described in Edward W. Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993). The author does not cover the Philippine experience in detail, which is perhaps only appropriate. The attention given us, if meager indeed, is nevertheless a cordial summons to a meditation on the total experience of colonization in the Philippines, no mind-wandering being required to call up the Filipino effort toward flight, acculturation and relocation in some place bound never to become a homeland.

S. I. Hayakawa had this idea that Asian immigrants, in order to deserve America, should command the language of America, which, to most Filipinos, was a touching notion, having learned to transform their anxieties as exiles into images of themselves as more American than the Americans of popular culture and Hollywood. Observers could not fail to realize, in any event, that legislations on language are essentially political exercises. It is calling in the bulldozer to clear the trail when, in fact, we have already considered a promising opening in the bush. We know this from experience.

It is rather easy to forget that peoples in colonized Asia, if we may venture a generalization, have had language upon language to quarrel over, or most certainly to cope with, over time, they have lost over time a sense of urgency about the whole business. When statutory measures are resorted to, considerable violence results.

The Philippines, though, has been spared in this regard, it must be pointed out. In fact, the lack of rigor in the national language policy has released unprecedented creativity and artistic imagination in, ironically, the language that colonialism gave expressly for administration.

Now although coming late by about two decades, there is the aforesaid *Companion* to attest to the international attention received by Filipino literature in the English language. How can this not happen since through a combination of naivete, patience, diligence, sacrifice, and sheer derring-do, we have won "access to the world literary tradition and a protection toward insularity" (McArthur 1992, 405). The language has become our "natural means of expression," this despite the wide support to Filipino during these last two decades. English thrives and so does Filipino—with a vengeance. There is a new flair and flavor in the writing since the fifties (Cruz 1992, 14) and to the attentive social observer it has become clear that one

fundamental truth about language is demonstrated in the Philippine situation: that it answers to a contemporaneity and a geography, and that its users are its masters, not the laws. We do with language whatever it is that we can get away with.

The Problem of the Regional Languages

We did get away with something else, and this has been painful and sad. I refer to abortions and, even more horrendous, cultural infanticides! Why so? And who have been the victims?

Every single one of our languages has a life of its own, a God-given body and breath, a being-that-is-itself, endowed with a natural right to existence (Diamond 1993, 78-85).¹ Yet what has happened? From our very cultural center, Manila, we have squeezed the life out of several of these; we have throttled the words and lost the ideas that those words bear. Let me offer an example:

My sociologist friend, Professor Efren Padilla is, as it happens, among the very few Filipinos of my acquaintance in California with whom you might exchange notions about language.² He knows Hiligaynon, unlike Mrs. Padilla, who happens to be American; but that is unimportant to her. The songs are what she loves. When riding off to work, on BART, she has her headphones on, the cassette tape recorder at her side engaging her attention with a Bisayan song. And now consider that beautiful ballad "Dandansoy," probably the mother of all Bisayan songs.

You probably know the portion widely sang in the provinces; it tells about a mother bidding her child good-bye. The stanza that follows; it is about an elderly person advising the traveller,

Do not bother about drinking water;
Should you become thirsty,
stop in the shade by the roadside
And there dig yourself a well.

The Bisayan word for well is *bonbon*, and in this particular verb form it becomes *magbubon-bubon*, meaning "to make a little well of your own." The message is clear and powerful. Our traveller is resourcefulness personified. Then and there he has found himself potable water; thirst, to him, presents no problem. The Bisayan *magbubon-bubon* is a foreign word in metropolitan culture. But isn't the way of life celebrated in the folksong our very liberation? We have been denied, thus, the folk mind's solution to foreign aid and onerous

bank loans that are currently the nation's debt burden. Make contact with your heritage, the song urges. Why endure all this mendicancy and unending material poverty? During all these years, the society need not have gone *pabugas-bugas*— meaning "to go begging from house to house in hopes of collecting a *chupa* or two of rice sufficient unto the day . . ." But there is some relief to this indignity, the language says; Hiligaynon has the solution all along.

"Is this the Filipino way? What happened to self-respect, to dignity? Why have we come so slow? Is our society so depleted in values? How do we inculcate values in our children? What's happened to resourcefulness, to diligence—for starters?" And there is panic in the tone, then a desperation, and a silence. Among the tirelessly hopeful are our trusting schoolteachers, who clamor for textbooks with "value-loaded" materials page after page, from K to 6. Had societies been organized to honor and preserve our languages, perhaps the country today would probably be less cash-poor, its moral banks, so to say, less depleted, than we have begun to discover.

To make words work for you, you have to know quite a few. Take *patugsiling*, which is also from Hiligaynon. It is a powerful word, a carrier of considerable moral and civic ideas. Consider, without being facetious, how it might unclog traffic, rid the street corner of garbage, clear the air of cigarette or tobacco smoke, or send bus passengers off to do *isbo* where decency beckons. It is a word that can hold down the able-bodied among our unemployed men to some productive occupation instead of the minding of fighting cocks. You can not stay hunkered off the shoulders of the national road for so long, or keep warming the bench at the barrio *sari-sari* store past the long hour before nightfall and the invasion by hordes of mosquitoes from the nearby swamp. But the swamp has been without *patugsiling*.

The word instructs us to turn our back on quite a long list of undesirable behavior. The word refers to that deep concern or consideration we are capable of showing others, assuming of course that tradition and family upbringing have not been lost on us. It is amazing how folk wisdom defies the onerous efforts of imperial missionaries. Then the linemen in the colonies hardly care, of course, to plumb the depths of indigenous culture though they may appear sanguine to a fault about extractive projects, in the model of the British, French, and Dutch. Or the colonial might elbow his way to the smorgasbord of the goodies of liberalism, as the last decades of

American hegemony in the Philippines have demonstrated. Still, of patugsiling the imperial world knows not.

For it is that faculty of mind and structure of feeling cultivated in the course of the transition from childhood and youth to maturity, and revealed in stages, refined over time, and demonstrated freely and without calculation. And of course calculation is what imperial endeavors are all about. On the other hand, patugsiling posits the spontaneous exercise of thoughtfulness and regard for others, a readiness to cherish unity and foster oneness in the family and community. In imperialism, it is the world order that we enthrone over. Thus, the concept of the global village appears overtly exciting, even comfortably romantic although essentially hegemonic, a possible actuality only at that point in time when transfers of technology become universal, when small nations shall have restored their economies to near health, their debts brought down to a tolerable bottom. In that distant future, who will be ready to observe patugsiling? To date, in any case, no more can world banks entertain the notion of patugsiling nor global money lenders turn into charitable institutions.

Will the concept ever grace the thinking of the metropolis? We have yet to find its synonym in Filipino, although Hiligaynon will, in all probability, survive. Language researchers claim that two thousand speakers of a language are all you need to guarantee the survival of a language for some time. There are quite a few that have died. Today Hiligaynon has more than the required two thousand carriers. Both Professor Padilla and I are, at this writing, nowhere near a hundred whereas there is, even as we write, Marie Smith, of Anchorage, Alaska, reportedly past seventy-two and believed to be the last native speaker of the Eyak language, which is nearly dead. Most certainly, patugsiling has still a long life ahead (Diamond 1993, 78-85).

For words are our amulet against time, and that they endure is as inexplicable as the miracle of night following day. They sometimes survive merely as utterance, as noises or signs that stand for something visible or tangible and, thereafter, make no further claim. This much I discovered about a word I have known for years and could not find the meaning of other than that it stood for the village in Oriental Mindoro where I grew up.

Wasig! And what does it say? What does it tell? True, in my mind it has stood for the name of a place, for both the cluster of huts along the bank of a small river, and for the very river itself. But

beyond this, what else do we have? And then something happened. I discovered there is a kind of Iloco cloth by that name.

There we were at this shop in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, on the slow edge of an October twilight. And there was this word Wasig, a tag for a bolt of cloth, one of several, on the shelf. If we live in history, then how did my village get here? Who brought the word over, travelling the thousand kilometers northward? And when? Did it not in fact come from even farther down, in Indonesia or Malaysia; perhaps, as the name for a fabric, or of a particular weave? Might it not be the name of a weaver, or perhaps that of the peddler who made a hump of a bundle of it on his shoulder, his gift to a charming Ilocandia maiden?

These questions belong to poetry. But why poetry? That out of the hewer of wood and gatherer of water a poet would yet emerge—how unthinkable! But planned or not, we learned under imperialism about notions like romance and fortune, and we even acquired a workbench and a drawerful of tools. It is doubtful whether from here on we can be deprived of either or of both; they have already been in our possession all these years, from Husing Sisiw and Balagtas to Rizal. Our literary creativity preceded or at the least coincided with the emergence of the narrative of empire. Already in motion were "the forces of world-wide accumulation and rule with a self-confirming ideological motor" with art and culture serving as "a screen across the process," as Said (1993, 60–61) puts it.³

But there is empire's celebratory text, the novel. Might it not serve us well as a narrative for our cautions and travail, perhaps even for and of our survival? That it evolved in the English world from the likes of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), thereafter the model narrative on the work of the missionaries of progress of civilization was some happenstance (Said 1993, 60–61). Since no one can hope to see the end of the imperial celebrations, because every venture needs rendering, every colonial a learner and reader of the story prepared for him, might we not celebrate on our own?

Said has noted that literary canons have served as "polyphonic accompaniments to the expansion of Europe," particularly the British, French, and Dutch models of the narrative; and at the present time "we are at only the stage of trying to inventory the *interpella-tion* of culture by empire. . . ." There is therefore clearly a role for the colonial, for he has a melodic line of his own that could haunt the listener, albeit perhaps with themes from the imperial polyphonic music woven in for good measure.

There has to be a difference, however, in the total narrative. For the ruled, the story reads as a beginning (i. e., "The Philippines was discovered by Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 . . .") whereas to the ruler, the tale is about a process, the movement, an illusion of fulfillment ("The Philippines was granted independence . . ." etc., etc.). The first is a narrative proper to the colonial, the second one quite beyond his range, the story Friday cannot possibly tell.

Conclusion

In this context, Jose Rizal, writing *Noli Me Tangere*, was the colonial nearly about to disaffiliate himself from real engagements with social reality. But this was out of the question. At his command was the language and the culture of the empire; the challenge was merely apparent, the solution not too secret after all. To avoid occlusion of sentiment and purpose, he had to stay with Spanish, and call on satire and the privileging of imagery to assist the delivery of a narrative seemingly romantic, the stance appropriate to empire, but faithful to the native scene, which has to be the stance of the Filipino, the *anak bayan*.

The strategy has not lost potential to this day. It is precisely the reason why, in current Filipino writing, our social realism is often mistaken in the empire for ethnicity and folklore. Satire created for Rizal choice personages; his privileging of imagery, the surgeon with scalpel in hand, his society on the operating table, destined to remain in hospital, as it were, to this very day.

This was how he dealt with one of the felled trees of Time. The decision was not an expediency but a necessary calculation for reaching farther ground. He'd leave the log asprawl over the trail, to continue to dare the sun and rain to shred, rot, and restore to the earth every portion of it—bole, bark, branches, leaves—all.

Notes

1. "Like many animal species, thousands of languages are," Prof. Diamond warns, "in danger of extinction. At stake is the world's cultural heritage."

2. Professor Padilla, besides holding a professorship at California State University, Hayward, is Associate Director, Center for Filipino Studies, at CSUH.

3. He cites studies on empire and culture, suggesting works by Green's *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 1979) and V. G. Kiernan's *Marxism and Imperialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974) and similar works as "milestones" in the field.

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