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Bernardino Melendreras's Antologia Poetica and Nineteenth Century Philippine Literary Relations

Florentino H. Hornedo

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Texts and Documents

Bernardino Melendreras' *Antología Poética* and Nineteenth Century Philippine Literary Relations

FLORENTINO H. HORNEDO

The few extant works of Francisco Balagtas, Modesto de Castro's epistolary novel *Urbana at Felisa*, and what has generally been regarded as an inconsequential novel of Pedro Paterno, *Ninay*, and his poetry, *Sampaguitas*, appear as a very lean volume of Filipino literature over a period of roughly fifty years from 1838 when the *Florante at Laura* is believed to have been published, to 1885 when the *Ninay* was published. Along with these are the youthful exercises of Rizal as a student in Manila.

The result of this apparent leanness of literary output is the impressions of a poverty of Filipino literary appreciation during the period, 1838-85 and a sudden burst of literary creativity associated with the appearance of the two novels of Rizal and the multitude of essays and poems generally recognized as expression of the Propaganda Movement and then of the Revolution. This much is evident in current significant textbooks in Philippine literature, which leads to the further impression that the nationalist literature of the close of the century was a case of spontaneous generation, of an Athena sprung in full armor out of the *ilustrado* head. Thus, the sometimes intemperately laudatory tenor of literary historiography and criticism, especially of the works of Rizal and a few of the Revolutionaries. Little has been said about the literary upbringing of these Filipino writers, and almost nothing has been said about the antecedents and *literary relations* of their works.

A reading of the essays and poems written in Spanish in the newspapers of the day (e.g. *El Oriente*, *Revista Semanal Ilustrada de Ciencias, Literatura, Artes, Industria, Comercio, Noticias*, &, founded in 1875) makes

the diction and prosody of Rizal seem unoriginal, even hackneyed, since others before him had been using identical or similar turn of phrases.¹ This impression becomes even sharper upon reading Iberian writing of the day, much of which was accessible to the Filipino ilustrados both through their teachers in school and their own reading.² From what one learns incidentally from reports concerning the literary contests in which Rizal took part, there were a number of poets among the members of the local Spanish community with whom many Filipinos were undoubtedly familiar.³ Some of these Spaniards were from peninsular Spain and had been well read or brought up in the literature of the period, and were certainly influenced by current Iberian trends. Such was Fr. Bernardino Melendreras, O.F.M. (1815–67), who was assigned for some time in the Bicol region and there became enchanted with local lore and the features of the landscape. Such enchantment wedded Spanish sensibility and diction with local (Bicol) lore and landscape fairly illustrative of then current Spanish Romanticism, the local color and *costumbrismo* it involved, and Spanish contemporary formal conventions.

1. In the *El Oriente*, some forty poems were published between 2 January 1876 and 17 September 1876, excluding some poems and excerpts of poems included in reviews and other journalistic articles.

2. See for example Angel del Río and Amelia A. del Río, eds. *Antología General de la Literatura Española* vol. 2 (from 1700–1936), (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960). See the section on "Siglos XVIII–XIX: Poetas de Transición," pp. 116 ff., and the note on Ramon de Mesonero Romanos (1803–82), p. 224. The del Ríos note that "*En la obra de Mesonero se define en sus rasgos esenciales el artículo de costumbres como género literario característico del siglo XIX.*" ["In the work of Mesonero the matters of custom as characteristic literary genre of the nineteenth century is defined in its essential features."] Both in the writings in Spain and in the Philippines of the time, the local color trend was characteristic. Mesonero wrote "*Escenas Matritenses.*" The period turned out a vast number of prose and poems about country places and local customs in the style of the Spanish romanticism of the time. This is the period of, among others, Fernán Caballero (1796–1877), Gustavo Adolfo Becquer (1836–70), Jose Echegaray (1832–1916), Juan Valera (1824–1905), and Benito Pérez Galdos (1843–1920). Galdos it was whose novels were best sellers at the time Rizal and company were in Spain, and from whose novel *Doña Perfecta* Rizal got his plot for *Noli Me Tangere*, and probably also the notion of literary social criticism. The trends in Spain are clearly reflected in the prose and poetry published in the Philippines of the period, and were doubtless read by the students at the Ateneo de Manila and the University of Santo Tomas at one time or other.

3. The poem of a winner in the poetry contest in Murcia, Spain, was published in *El Oriente* (3 Sept. 1876), p. 12. The poem was "*La Una de la Noche*" by Ricardo Gil Garcia who had won other poetry prizes in Spain. There are also striking modernist poems published in this newspaper which should be taken up at greater length elsewhere for their value in Philippine literary relations.

THE ANTOLOGÍA POÉTICA

Fr. Bernardino Melendreras left a body of works most of which are now contained in a collection called *Antología Poética* consisting of fifty-four poems of greatly varied lengths (excluding a more ambitious but apparently incomplete heroic narrative called variously as "Handiong," "El Ibal," "Ibalong.")⁴ A reading of this anthology against Iberian literature of the period gives a fair idea of the literary relations of Filipino writing of the period, and probably even of Filipino literature written in the native languages of the Hispanized cultural communities. The text that follows presents the text and translation of a selection of poems from the *Antología*.

The copy on which this note is based was given to me by William Henry Scott in March 1987 with his handwritten note:

Transcripción del "Poesías del P. Fr. Bernardino Melendreras; falleció en Manila el 7 de Octubre de 1867," selectadas, en el Archivo Franciscano Ibero-Oriental, Duque de Sesto, 9 Madrid-9, signatura 260-1, gracias de la amabilidad del P. Fr. Apolinar Pastrana Riol, OFM, en Mayo del año 1983.

(Transcription of the "Poetry of Father Fray Bernardino Melendreras; died in Manila on 7 October 1867," selected, in the Archivo Franciscano Ibero-Oriental, Duque de Sesto, 9 Madrid-9, signature 260-1. Thanks to the kindness of Father Fray Apolinar Pastrana Riol, OFM, in May 1983.)

The *Antología* is typescript, on 32 x 22 cm. paper, ninety-eight leaves of poetry (text on only one side), and seven leaves of notes and a brief introduction by Fr. Pastrana-Riol.

SELECTED TEXTS AND TRANSLATION

EL IGORROTE⁵

Del Isarog soy salvaje,
no conozco esclavitud;
soy feliz, porque soy libre,
oh! que dicha!, ju...ju...ju.

THE MOUNTAIN DWELLER

A savage from Isarog am I,
a stranger to slavery;
I'm happy because I'm free,
oh! how lucky! hu...hu...hu.

4. See my review of Fr. Bernardino Melendreras, OFM (1815-1867), y Su Obra Poética Sobre la Region del Bicol (Filipinas) by Apolinar Pastrana Riol, OFM. Separata from *Misionalia Hispánica* 39 (1982):85-181. In *Philippine Studies* 32 (1984): 526-28. Another version of this review also appeared in *Unitas* 57 (1984): 113-16.

5. The term *igorrote* or *ygolote* up to the nineteenth century was used by Spaniards, especially missionaries, to mean aboriginal "mountain dwellers" in various parts of the

Yo soy libre cuanto quiero;
cuanto quiero, pues soy rey
de mi mismo, sin que nadie
ponga veto a mi querer.

I am as free as I wish,
as I wish, wherefor I'm king
of myself, with none
to veto my desires.

Son mis flechas el baluarte
de mi dulce libertad;
el que intente sujetarme
su veneno probará.

My arrows are the bulwark
of my sweet freedom;
he who tries to conquer me
will taste its poison.

Es el bosque mi palacio;
la floresta, mi verjel;
bajo lianas olorosas
tengo el trono de mi edén.

The jungle is my palace;
the woods, my garden;
under fragrant vines
I have the throne of my Eden.

Corro montes con mis perros,
vencedores ya de mil
javalés y venados,
y de monos un sin fin.

I run over hills with my dogs,
conquerors of a thousand
wild boars and deers,
and of monkeys innumerable.

Las serpientes colosales
prendo y mato con ardid;
ni se escapa de mi astucia
el constrictor baladí.

The colossal serpents
I catch and kill with ruse;
nor from my astuteness escape
the worthless constrictor.

Me alimento con sus carnes,
que devoro con ardor;
porque siento que electrizan
mi valiente corazón.

I feed on their meats,
which I ardently devour;
because I feel they electrify
my valiant heart.

¡Ju...ju...ju...!que fuerza tengo!
¡Ju...ju...ju...!que grande soy!
venzo fieras y reptiles;
soy el rey del Isarog.

Hu...hu...hu...What strength I have!
Hu...hu...hu...How great I am!
I conquer wild beasts and reptiles
I'm the king of Isarog.

Anden otros por el golfo,
que diviso desde aquí,
persiguiendo, sin descanso,
la ballena y el golfin.

Others rove by the gulf,
a glimpse of which I see from here,
pursuing, without respite,
the whale and the dolphin.

country. They are to be distinguished from the *remontados* who were Christians from the lowlands who had fled to the mountains to avoid meeting unacceptable Spanish demands. Fr. Melendreras was familiar with aboriginal mountain dwellers of the Bicol, and he may have had in mind the *Dumagat* which until today inhabit the mountains of Bicol. Today, the term *Igorot* is exclusively applied generically to the aborigines of the Cordillera region in central northern Luzon.

Yo no envidio sus azares,
ni deseo su botín;
yo soy libre en ésta selva,
¡Que más quiero!, soy feliz.

Con mi linda compañera,
paso el tiempo sin pensar
en riquezas, que no cambio
por mi amada libertad.

Ju...ju...ju..., si alguien viene
a quitármela, veré
lo que importa ser yo libre,
lo que vale su desmán.

I do not envy their hazards,
nor desire their boot;
I am free in this jungle,
What more do I wish! I'm happy.

With my pretty partner,
I pass the time without thinking
of riches, which I do not barter
for my beloved freedom.

Hu...hu...hu..., if someone comes
to take it away from me, he'll see
how much my freedom matters,
how much he'll pay for his misdeed.

LOS MONTES DEL BICOL

Los montes del Bicol poblados están
de bellas serpientes, que infunden terror;
de abejas, que juntan la miel con afán;
y gayos insectos, que imitan su ardor
volando y zumbando con loco desmán
en torno del caliz de nítida flor
que halagan y besan con sumo placer
pasando las horas en este quehacer.

Allí los arrullos del grande torcaz,
allí de la tortola el dulce gemir,
allí los chillidos del ave rapaz,
allí de los *calaos* el ronco gafir;
los cantos de dicha, de amor y de paz
de mil avecillas, que saben sentir,
componen un himno de inmenso rumor
que el bosque dedica del mundo al Autor.

De día, ese himno grandioso, sin par;
de noche, el monótono y ríspido son,
sublime concierto, discorde cantar
que entona la selva en su admiración
al ver en los cielos mil orbes rodar,
sujieren al hombre con grave emoción
que eleve sus cantos a Aquel Sumo Bien,
que dicha y ventura les dona también.

THE MOUNTAINS OF BICOL

The mountains of Bicol are the home
 of beautiful serpents that inspire terror;
 of bees that gather up honey eagerly;
 and merry insects which imitate their ardor
 flying and buzzing in wild abandon
 around the chalice of the unsullied flower
 which they flatter and kiss with utmost pleasure
 whiling away the hours in this pastime.

There the cooing of the great wild pigeon,
 there the turtledove's sweet sighing,
 there the shrill sound of the bird of prey,
 there the hornbill's hoarse croaking;
 the songs of joy, of love and of peace
 from a thousand little birds who know how to feel
 compose a hymn of an immense murmur
 which the forest dedicates to the Author of the world.

By day, that grandiose hymn, incomparable;
 by night, the monotonous and harsh sound,
 sublime concert, discordant song
 which the forest sings in its wonderment
 upon seeing in the skies revolve a thousand orbs,
 inspiring in man the deepest urge
 to lift his songs to that Supreme Good,
 that joy and good fortune He give them as well.

A MIS COMPAÑEROS, DESPUES DE HABER VISITADO LA CUEVA
 DE COLAPNITAN EL 11 DE AGOSTO DE 1861

En un monte selvoso se visita
 una cueva súblime, en que natura
 nos da, del Criador en piedra escrita,
 idea de su ser y su hermosura.

Hay allí torreones y obeliscos,
 estatuas de mil formas caprichosas,
 y montes ostentando, con sus riscos,
 las figuras mas raras y espantosas.

Cuanto puede crear la fantasía,
 uniendo la verdad a la quimera,
 en dibujo, escultura y poesía,
 allí forma amalgama verdadera.

Es un caos su todo; un laberinto
do descuellan los góticos primores
como resaltan por aquel recinto,
sobre confusos árboles, las flores.

Colapnitan la llaman los primeros
que la dicha tuvieron de nombrarla;
nosotros la hemos visto, compañeros,
y está en nuestro deber rebautizarla.

De los góticos cuevas llamaremos
la que su arquitectura representa;
y con gusto nosotros sostendremos
que el nombre que la han dado no le asienta.

Porque pueblan murcielagos sus naves
que esto quiere decir la Colapnitan—
¿podrán patrocinar los hombres graves
palabras que la afean y marchitan?

A tan grande espectáculo no cuadra
un nombre tan somero; no, queridos;
la locución vulgar siempre taladra
de personas sensatas los oídos.

Pues gótica la cueva de Libmanan
será para nosotros; y adoptado
será de aquellos hombres que se afanan
en hablar un idioma cultivado.

TO MY COMPANIONS AFTER HAVING VISITED THE CAVE
OF COLAPNITAN ON 11 AUGUST 1861

On a wooded mountain one can visit
a cave sublime, in which nature
gives us, from the Creator, written in stone,
an idea of His being and His beauty.

There are watchtowers and obelisks,
statues of a thousand capricious forms,
and hills displaying, with their crags,
figures most rare and frightful.

Whatever fantasy can create,
uniting truth and chimera,
in design, sculpture and poetry,
there forms a true amalgam.

Chaos is all of it; a labyrinth
 where gothic elegance stands out
 as if jutting out of that enclosure,
 over a web of trees, the flowers.

Colapnitan the ancients called it,
 they who had the fortune to name it;
 dear comrades, we have seen it,
 and our duty it is to rename it.

From the gothic caves we will name
 what its architecture represents;
 and with pleasure we will maintain
 that the name they gave it is improper.

Because its naves are inhabited by bats
 which is to say the *Colapnitan*—
 can grave men patronize
 words which deface and make it fade?

Such a grand spectacle cannot take seriously
 a name so superficial; no, dear friends;
 the vernacular speech always offends
 persons with fine sense of hearing.

Therefore gothic the cave of Libmanan
 will be for us; and may it be accepted
 by those men who fervently desire
 to speak a cultivated idiom.

A UN AMIGO

En soledad profunda
 paso noches y días,
 y son mis alegrías
 mirar la furibunda
 eminencia rotunda
 del Mayong fulminante
 proceloso gigante,
 que llamo ya mi amigo,
 porque, con el, consigo
 llevar mi tiempo adelante.

TO A FRIEND

In deep solitude
 I spend nights and days,
 and it is my happiness
 to watch the furious
 rotund eminence
 of the fulminant Mayon,
 tempestuous giant,
 whom now I call my friend,
 because, with him, I am able
 to carry my time onwards.

AL RIACHUELO ASLON

Despedida

Fresco arroyelo [sic], donde yo solía
mis cuitas aliviar, ¡adiós!, que parto;
¡adiós!, por siempre, Aslón; de ti me aparto
sin saber donde iré sin senda y guía.

La marcha emprenderé; mi simpatía
contigo quedará; que si de parto,
no por esto de ti me desaparto,
ni olvidaré que fuiste mi alegría.

Mas, deseo dejarte yo otras prendas;
y éstas prendas serán de mis dos ojos
este raudal de lágrimas que vierto.

Acogió el riachuelo mis ofrendas
y, vuelto ninfa, puesta de hinojos,
"llévete—dijo—el cielo al patrio puerto."

TO THE RIVULET ASLON

Farewell

Fresh stream, where I used to unburden
my troubles, good-bye, for I leave;
good-bye, forever, Aslon; from you I depart
without knowing where I go, without road nor guide.

I will surely depart; [but] my sympathy
with you will stay; for, though I depart,
not for this do I from you become apart,
nor will I forget that you were my happiness.

But I wish to leave you other gifts;
and these tokens will be from my eyes,
this stream of tears which I shed.

The rivulet received my parting offerings
and, turned into a nymph, fell on her knees,
and said, "Bring with you the sky to your native haven."

A UN AMIGO QUE ME PIDIÓ VERSOS

Cuando pienso, mi amigo, que, sin pena,
pasas los días cabe la montaña,
que lavas fulminantes en si entraña,
el alma de amargura se me llena.

¿Juzgas, acaso, porque está serena,
que no abriga el furor y ruda sana,
con que suele inundar esa campaña
de candentes azufres y de arena?

¿Nada te dice su penacho humoso?
¿no te espantan las ruinas de Daraga?
¿no percibes el llanto lastimoso
de la humana hecatombe que allí vaga?

No acierto comprender como reposo
puedes hallar en tierra tan aciaga.
Si la musa te halaga,
si inspiración te presta con su acento,
dime si es vana la aprensión que siento.

TO A FRIEND WHO ASKED ME FOR VERSES

When I think, my friend, that, without worry,
you pass your days near the mountain
which encloses in its entrails burning lava,
the soul of grief fills me.

Do you think, perhaps, because it is serene,
that it does not harbor the fury and vigorous rue
with which by habit it floods that field
with incandescent sulfur and with sand?

Does not its smoky crest tell you anything?
Do not the ruins of Daraga frighten you?
Do not you hear the pitiful lamentation
of the human hecatomb which wander there?

I cannot comprehend what rest
you can find in a land so ill-fated.
If the muse delights you,
if inspiration lends you her voice,
tell me if the fear I feel is vain.