

# philippine studies

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 34, no. 1 (1986) 3–20

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## The Philippine Informal Essay in English: 1918-41

ESTELA ANNA FERNANDO-REYES

The informal essay is principally self-revelatory, intimate, personal, conversational, whimsical, and light. Virginia Woolf said of it: "The principle that controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure . . . The triumph is a triumph of style."<sup>1</sup> This study will trace the development of the Philippine informal essay in English from its beginnings in 1918, through its flowering in the 1930s, and up to the war in 1941.

### THE EARLY YEARS, 1918-27

The first informal essay in English in the Philippines was "A Call" by Alejandrina Santiago, written for the *Philippine Review* in 1918.<sup>2</sup> It appeared ten years after the first Philippine short story in English, a fact that is not surprising since the familiar essay is a late development in any national literature. In fact, this was only twenty years after the United States acquired the Philippines in 1898. This is due, it seems, to the Filipinos' capacity to assimilate language quickly. The educational system, the rise of publications like the *College Folio*, *The Filipino*, *Philippine Columbian Notes*, and the influence of American mentors like the Fanslers in the University of the Philippines were, doubtless, incentives also.

In "A Call," the informal style was present, but not much else.

1. Virginia Woolf, "The Modern Essay," in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 1 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 41.

2. Leopoldo Yabes, "The Filipino Essay in English—A Critical Study," (M.A. Thesis, University of the Philippines, 1949), p. 5.

Here Santiago muses on nature and man in connection with everyday life in and near the city of Iloilo. Her language is cloying, waxing into too many superlatives on the beauty of the sunset and the mountains and the sky; her soul is too enraptured; too naive. Again, this is not surprising, as in this early period of apprenticeship in the English language, the first Filipino writers were prone to sentimentalism and verbiage—characteristics acquired from the Spanish and from the Oriental predilection to rant. They were still grappling with a new grammar and a new idiom; thus their works were naturally stilted, ungraceful, and artificial.

The same may be said of Fernando Maramag's early attempts, in the form of editorials written for the *Philippine National Weekly*.<sup>3</sup> Although most of these have for their themes calls to decency and integrity, as against the prevalence of selfishness and vanity that he saw in society, he has two very personal essays praising a certain lady, his "Pearl Princess." His language is awkward, but there are traces of the later Maramag in his rich vocabulary, and his lucid and restrained style.

The third writer of this period was Juan Collas who wrote about the American flapper in 1922.<sup>4</sup> Although his essays still bear marks of the floridity and long-windedness of Spanish writing, Collas has definitely more control of idiom and imagery than, say Santiago. He is the first essayist to display wit and ease with the English language.

#### THE LATER YEARS, 1928-41

The period 1928-41 saw a remarkable growth of the informal essay. For two decades Filipino writing in English had been characterized by "slovenly versification, bad grammar and idiom, inappropriate or meaningless diction, and vague or confused imagery—the four, "inexcusables" of the then nascent Filipino literature in English. To these Tom Inglis Moore had added "sentimentalism and formlessness."<sup>5</sup> But now a minor flowering, a literary up-

3. These editorials which may be classified as informal essays are six in all, written for the *Philippine National Weekly* on 4 January 1919; 18 January 1919; 2 February 1919; 15 February 1919; 16 May 1919; and 17 May 1919.

4. *Philippines Free Press*, 18 November 1922. Reproduced in Yabes, "The Filipino Essay," pp. 112-13.

5. George Pope Shannon, "The Inexcusables," *Literary Apprentice I* (December 1928): 46-58; T. Inglis Moore, "Hark, Hark the Lark," *Literary Apprentice III* (1929): 23-36.

heaval occurred.

In 1940 Yabes called this period of Filipino literature "the most productive of distinctive work in the half century of Filipino writing in English."<sup>6</sup> During his time, Jose Garcia Villa, A.B. Rotor, and Manuel Arguilla wrote their short stories; Ignacio Manlapaz, F. B. Icasiano, I. V. Mallari, Salvador P. Lopez, Federico Mangahas, Amando G. Dayrit, A. E. Litiatco, Maria Luna, Maria Kalaw, Antonio and Ariston Estrada were the essayists featured in newspapers and magazines; R. Zulueta da Costa, Angela Manalang, M. de Gracia Concepcion, Conrado Ramirez, Virgilio Floresca and others made names for themselves as poets.

What were some of the circumstances that encouraged this productivity? First, there was the organization of various writers' clubs notably, the U.P. Writers' Club under T. Inglis Moore, and the Philippine Writer's League and the encouragement of American professors like George P. Shannon, and Filipino teachers like Carlos P. Romulo, Cristino Jamias, Vicente Hilario, and Mauro Mendez. There was also the influence of foreign journals like *The Nation*, the *Saturday Review*, *American Mercury*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Outlook*, and *Atlantic Monthly*, the founding of publications like the *Literary Apprentice*, *Quill*, *Argonaut*, *Leader*, *National Review*, *Philippine Magazine* and incentives from newspapers and the government like the Commonwealth Literary Contest. Very important was the close coterie of writers at the time. Aside from the formal literary societies then existing, the writers like S. P. Lopez, Manuel Arguilla, F. B. Icasiano, Federico Mangahas, and Jose Lansang met frequently and regularly in various places. One was at the editor's office of the *Philippine Magazine*, the celebrated four o'clock tea with A.V.H. Hartendorp. Another was at the home of the Arguillas in Marcelo H. del Pilar. They called themselves the Beer Club. This was the group of Lopez, Icasiano, Dayrit, Litiatco, Mangahas, Hartendorp, and Walter Robb. Among the ladies were Estrella Alfon, Lyd Arguilla, Tessie Arzaga, Maria Kalaw, Maria Luna, and the Graus—Consuelo and Corazon. Mangahas and Icasiano also joined the Estradas—Ariston, Antonio and his wife, Josefa, at their home before and during the war. The group of Francisco Arcellana consisted of Delfin Fresnosa, Cornelio Reyes, N. V. M. Gonzalez, Manuel Viray, Lazaro

6. Yabes, "Filipinos Write Books," *Philippines Herald Midweek Magazine*, 9 October 1940, p. 1.

M. Espinosa, and the other Veronicans. Finally, the establishment of the Commonwealth was probably the underlying cause of all this activity. When it was inaugurated on 15 November 1935, and political identity was at last conferred on the Filipinos, the consciousness of being one people, one nation, fired the search for national identity. It was a "period of freedom and great national responsibility." All literary types were exploited. "There was an inflorescence of literature," Jose M. Hernandez writes about this time. "A sunburst of glory seemed to illumine the whole country. Everybody was eager to . . . try his wings . . . . Revolutionary ideologies came with the surge of a tidal wave and swept a great many of the writers off their feet . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Truly, the literary development in the 1930s was beyond expectation. National consciousness, which had its beginnings in the nineteenth century, found crystallization in the new regime. Apparently, this literary flowering was the first declaration toward a new awareness of national destiny. The young writers, taking the cue from a vigorous and intensely nationalistic President, participated enthusiastically in this literary movement. It was an era that began with hopes for the young nation and wound up in the maelstrom of World War II. The literature of this period was closest to the life of the Filipino: "it reflected the deep impulses, the longings and yearnings of a people preparing for political emancipation. Life then, just before Pearl Harbor, was secure, prosperous . . . [it] was easy, comfortable, happy."<sup>8</sup> The daily paper brought the witty commentaries on the foibles of high and low society by Amando G. Dayrit, the sermons in print of Antonio Estrada, the cantankerous analyses of society by S. P. Lopez, the humorous broadsides of Federico Mangahas, and the committed journalism of Jose Lansang. Occasional pieces by women writers, too, like Maria Kalaw, Estrella Alfon, Maria Luna, and Lydia Arguilla exhibited gentleness, awareness and craft. All in all, in this period when everything seemed to be relative and nothing appeared absolute, when hopes were high for the political and cultural growth of a young and dynamic nation, a new sense of freedom permeated not only the life of the people but also the literature produced.

7. Jose M. Hernandez, "Filipino Writing in English," *Manila Times Midweek Review*, 4 February 1948, p. 6.

8. Ibid.

The most significant event of this period was the publication of an obscure, slim little volume in 1933 entitled *Dear Devices, Being a First Volume of Familiar Essays* in English. Calling themselves "Certain Filipinos" the authors were Antonio Estrada, A. E. Litiatco, Maria Luna, Federico Mangahas, Jose A. Lansang, Ariston Estrada, Maria Kalaw, and F. B. Icasiano.

It got its title from an essay by Christopher Morley on "The Hilarity of Hilaire" (Belloc) which is the epigraph of the book:

WHOSO dotes upon fine prose, prose interlaced with humour, pathos, and whim, orchestrated to a steady rhythm, coruscated with an exquisite tenderness for all that is lovable and high-spirited on this dancing earth, go you now to some bookseller and procure for yourself a little volume called 'A Picked Company' where Mr. E. V. Lucas has gathered some of the best of Mr. Belloc's pieces. Therein you will find love of food, companionship, cider and light wines; love of children, artillery, and inns in the outlands; love of salt water, great winds, and brown hills at twilight—in short, passionate devotion to all the DEAR DEVICES that make life so sweet.<sup>9</sup>

As the epigraph states, whoever loves "fine prose, prose interlaced with humour, pathos, and whim,"—which is, really, as fine a definition of the familiar essay as one can come across—and who are passionately devoted to all the "dear devices that make life so sweet" would do well to pick up this little green book. For as reviewed by Concepcion Dadufalza seventeen years after its publication,

[t]hese Dear Devices have grown more dear, more precious in their rarity. Time has not withered nor custom staled their charming variety. If you are of the passionate few who love the familiar essay, you will find your time pleasantly spent in the company of eight Filipinos who found the *genre* a convenient medium for the expression of—to quote one of them—"nothing and everything" that is nearest and dearest to the human heart.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from the eight authors of *Dear Devices*, the other informal essayists of the period were S. P. Lopez, Amador Daguió, Lydia Villanueva, Pura Santillan-Castreñe, Amando Dayrit, Alfredo Q. Gonzales, Francisco Arcellana, Conrado Pedroche, Manuel Arguilla, Arturo B. Rotor, Estrella D. Alfon, Solomon V. Arnaldo, Alfredo F. Benitez, Antonia Bisquera, Fernando Maramag, and others. The best and most representative writers of this period

9. *Shandygaff* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1918), pp. 166-67.

10. *Literary Apprentice* XIV (1949-50): 107.

were: Antonio Estrada, F. B. Icasiano, A. E. Litiatco, S. P. Lopez, Francisco Arcellana, Federico Mangahas, and Amando Dayrit.

Antonio Estrada was pronounced by Mona Highley in 1941 as "the master of perhaps the finest essayistic style in the country."<sup>11</sup> His early essays, written for the *Green and White* (he studied in La Salle) were marked by stiffness and a propensity to philosophize, "On Fairies and Fairy Tales," however, written in 1929 when he was twenty-one, marks a dramatic shift in tone and style. We are unprepared for this splendid masterpiece, surely one of the best-loved familiar essays from this era. It is a charming, as piquant, and as magical as its subject. His other essays, like "On Writing," "On Belloc," and "On Essay and Two Men Also" exhibit the same charm, the same easy hand, conversational tone, and fine style.<sup>12</sup>

#### F. B. ICASIANO

F. B. Icasiano was said—and I am quoting Highley again,—to have "the true essayist's zest for living." Viewing the world about him . . .

with perennial wonder, melancholy and humor, he succeeds very well in sharing his moods with us . . . Humor is his special gift—a humor difficult to analyze where sense parades democratically about with solemn nonsense, and a quiet irony often creeps out over the ineludible and mournful follies of the species homo—you and me.<sup>13</sup>

He wrote musical reviews and drew cartoons for the *Leader*, *National Review*, *The Citizen*, *Herald*, *Philippine Magazine*, and *Graphic*, edited *The Sunday Tribune Magazine* and later, during the Japanese Occupation, *Philippine Review*. He collected thirty-five of his Sunday columns for the *Tribune Magazine* which ran from 1935 into a little book called *Horizons from My Nipa Hut* by Mang Kiko published in 1941.

His first essays appeared in *Literary Apprentice* under the various pseudonyms Ho-Ti, Frabrics, Knickerknocker van Loon, and Salvador de Cavandoga. For *Dear Devices*, he contributed four essays: he is intimate in "Over Two Cups of Coffee"; humorous in

11. Mona Highley, "On the Contemporary Essay in the Philippines," *Philippines Herald Midweek Magazine*, 21 May 1941, p. 11.

12. *Green and White* VII (October 1929): 8-10 (Reprinted in *Dear Devices*, pp. 8-10); VII (March 1930): 333-36; IX (Commencement Number, 1932): 73-79 (Under the pseudonym "Luis de La Rosa") and; VIII (October 1930): 132-33 (Reprinted in *Dear Devices*, pp. 5-7).

13. Highley, "On the Contemporary Essay," p. 11.

"On Wearing the Barong Tagalog"; evocative in "Old Things and New"; and meditative in "Sonia."<sup>14</sup> For the *Literary Apprentice*, he has several jocular and delightful pieces, "Shaking a Leg," in which he pokes fun at the Chinese, and "Pancit," a veritable sonnet to the dish. In "Of Music" we see Icasiano the lover of Beethoven and Wagner. "This Is Not Funny" is an angry essay about humor. But in "Four Pieces"<sup>15</sup>—that is, on cats, the prawn, being broke, and a lady's handbag—Icasiano is back to his usual self: rambling, urbane, whimsical, and low-keyed.

His column, "From My Nipa Hut" was an entertaining miscellany of anecdotes about Filipino idiosyncracies and habits, good and bad, in general, the overlooked, "the significant piece of trivia." It needed an easy informal style, a deliberately unsystematic and impressionistic treatment of his subject. "My Pillow"<sup>16</sup> illustrates this handsomely. His easy style and low-keyed comic comment cloak his wise philosophizing.

In 1941 Icasiano selected thirty-five essays from his column and published them in *Horizons from My Nipa Hut*. This was the first single-author volume of Filipino familiar essays in English. Mang Kiko, the nipa-shack philosopher, unlike his contemporary columnists who preferred to comment on political squabbles and economic theories, chose to write on local rural scenes, the peculiar characteristic traits of barrio folks, some personal incidents of his own life, and occasional flights to the literary horizon:

[He] viewed with wonder the world around him just as Mang Kiko viewed it philosophically from his *papag* by the window and saw that there was much he loved in it—the odor of ripening palay, the din and clatter of a third-class train compartment, the sight of a carabao luxuriating in a mud-hole, the swirling waters when the rains [come], the baby in its mother's arms struggling against Christianity at the baptismal font, and the glide of a falling bamboo leaf.<sup>17</sup>

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79, pp. 80-82, pp. 83-85, pp. 86-91. "Of Old Things and New" is reprinted in Richard V. Croghan, S.J., *The Development of Philippine Literature in English* (Since 1900) (Quezon City: Alemar-Phoenix Publishing House, Inc., 1975), pp. 109-110; "Sonia" is reprinted in *Literary Apprentice* X (1937): 97-102; in Croghan, pp. 81-84; and anthologized in Yabes, "The Filipino Essay," pp. 170-75.

15. *Literary Apprentice* V (1932): 72-74. (Under the pseudonym, "Ho-ti"); VI (1933): 23-36 (Under the pseudonym, "Knickerknocker van Loon"); VII (1934): 29-31; VII (1934): 121-24 (Under the pseudonym, "Knickerknocker van Loon"); XI (1938): 65-72.

16. *Tribune*, 20 February 1938. Anthologized in Yabes, "The Filipino Essay," pp. 566-69.

17. Arturo G. Roseburg, ed., *Essays English American and Filipino* (3rd ed. Manila: Alemar's, 1956), p. 157.



The book is divided into four sections: Local Horizon (We Filipinos), Literary Horizon (Excursion in Light Literature), Mad Horizon ("There's Method in His Madness") and Heavenly Horizon ("There Are More Things in Heaven and Earth . . .").

The essays in the first section traipse delightfully over such Filipino characteristics as our recklessness and wont to believe in chance, our oriental fatalism, our overwhelming and sometimes rash hospitality, our meekness and our aversion to offending the other person's feelings, our procrastination, our hospitality again, even if insincere, just because it is in our character to invite all or sundry to a meal. The last two essays deal with the Filipino habit of chewing *buyo* and with the atrocities we commit in speaking the English language, the last a rib-tickling parody bordering on absurdity. Throughout, his infectious humor manifests itself.

In "Literary Horizon," the second section, it is not an altogether different Mang Kiko that we encounter. Gone are the bite and the sting of the foregoing pieces but the elemental accents are still there, only this time subdued and placid, like a lazy stream flowing under a bridge, or like a falling bamboo leaf, the title of the first essay in the section, which gives a definite hint of what is surely to come. Da Costa in his review says:

It is here that Mang Kiko goes to town astride his Carabbasus, straying off to picnics and poetry, friendship, hands, sunsets, trains, an orange on the road, little discoveries which are all exuberant adventures in the whimsical, the imaginative, the poetical, the real. Here, then, Lady Pungol dons wings if only to prove that a carabao can fly,—which it does and very gracefully too . . . .<sup>18</sup>

Thus he discourses on friends, hands, mosquitoes, local movies, picnics, and rivers.

"There's Method in His Madness," Mang Kiko quotes as a subtitle to the third part of the book, "Mad Horizons." There is indeed. "Where he praises nonsense he really celebrates common sense, and where he makes a last stand for laziness his mind is most energetic."<sup>19</sup> Here he is like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills and totally entranced by the young.

And so he goes on his gay way to arrive at "Heavenly Horizons"

18. R. Zulueta da Costa, "Mang Kiko Goes to Town," *Philippines Herald Midweek Magazine*, p. 7.

19. Ibid.

where he pokes fun this time, on the characters one meets in church at Mass, or in a baptism, where he is at once hilarious and philosophical. Icasiano's is surely the finest expression of the comic spirit produced by any Filipino writer.

#### ALFREDO E. LITIATCO

Alfredo E. Litiatco, called the Philippine "Barrie,"<sup>20</sup> has been likened to Charles Lamb for his kindness and whimsicality, and to Stevenson for his courage and cheer. His first essays in *Green and White* (like Estrada, he was from La Salle) were book reviews, short stories, and articles, products of an apprentice's hand. With *Dear Devices*, though, he came into his own. "From Proverbs Deliver Us" is brisk, racy and effervescent, like the author. "This Won't Hurt a Bit," about, of all things, toothaches, is one of his best; it is pure raillery from beginning to end. "On Not Being Smart,"<sup>21</sup> "On Having No Enemies," and "Authors Should be Read Not Seen,"<sup>22</sup> are all droll pieces, and with Ms. Dadufalza we say that "with A. E. Litiatco we amble along and there's nary a smile will cross our lips as we listen to his anecdotes and reminiscences."<sup>23</sup>

Litiatco was known as a ladies' man and in "On Tidbits and Tidbits" we learn why. Here he is describing a lady friend as she cooks:

Moisture appears on nose-tip and upper lip, wisps of hair rebel, and the apron loses its solemnly starched appearance; but each minute which flits by only serves to emphasize the poetic quality of the atmosphere about the lady . . . A man slicing onions is mundane and a man lighting a match suggests trifles; but a woman slicing onions is ethereal and a woman lighting a match suggests tremendous things.<sup>24</sup>

"A. E. L." was how he signed himself in his weekly column, for the *Graphic*, "Little Things." In his weekly page of deceptively simple essays, Litiatco exercised his remarkable talent as observer

20. His first review for *Green and White* was on the book and movie, *Peter Pan*.

21. *Dear Devices*, pp. 12-16, (From *Green and White*); pp. 17-20, (From *Green and White*); pp. 21-24, (From *Leader V* [March 1933]).

22. *Literary Apprentice VII* (1934): 79-82. Litiatco, though not in the U.P. Writers' Club was said to be "of it." (Ibid., p. 128) and was one of the few non-UP students who were published in the *Apprentice*; *Quill*, 1935. Anthologized in Yabes, "The Filipino Essay," pp. 402-8.

23. Dadufalza, p. 107.

24. *Literary Apprentice VIII* (1935): 60-65.

and critic of the contemporary scene as well as poet and amateur philosopher. His manner was casual, offhand, and lightly ironic, his effects were always underplayed. What he did best was to take one of the small facts of everydaylife and give it a sudden surprising extension of meaning. Thus sundry topics like loneliness, his favorite authors, G. K. Chesterton, men and women, love, tolerance, and respect, and the difference between liking and loving were the substance of his column.<sup>25</sup>

He defends his egotism in his column, prompted by a reader's objection to his too-constant use of the pronoun *I*.

We begin at home, yes, but we do not remain there. We wander out, far afield and even to beyond the stars. If we see only with our eyes, it is because we have no other eyes at our disposal. The least we can do is to see everything. It so happens that is also the most one can do.

That is why we may write on anything from roast pig to dolls, from a little girl's drawings to a movie comedian's death, from painting the ceiling to getting out of bed on cold mornings. Unlike those who use *You*, *He*, and *We*, we who use *I* talk not merely of Mussolini and Technocracy, of fourth dimensions and the eternal verities, but also of little things—the little things which are ourselves and our likes and dislikes.<sup>26</sup>

"Little Things," like Morley's "Shandygaff" is a fitting title to his column for it is of the essence of informal essays.

Like Icasiano, Litiatco relished the ironies of existence, and their taste in literary clowning, their view of modern man and his environment were essentially the same. Like Icasiano, too, his essays and humorous anecdotes were almost always low-keyed, staying close to the level of everyday life. It is this simplicity of treatment, this willingness to let the material speak for itself without apparent manipulation that effected Litiatco's easy, natural, casual style. On the fifth anniversary of his column, Litiatco wrote what could be his epitaph, a clear example of his open-mindedness, his humanity, his irrepressible gaiety:

You see, running a column means being continually between the devil and the deep sea: in pleasing one reader, you displease another . . . Was it Sir Roger de Something-or-other who said, "Much may be said on both sides"? If so, the old boy himself didn't say half of it. *Too* much may be said on both sides—and it's your columnist that gets most of the fun (?)

25. "Little Things," *Graphic*, 24 October 1935, pp. 42-43; 21 May 1936, p. 13; 25 June 1936, pp. 20, 40; 22 October 1936, p. 20; 14 January 1937, p. 78.

26. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1936, pp. 20, 40.

because he's right on the middle as target for both barrels. The light brigade had nothing on him.

What, then, is the columnist to do? Nothing except to resolve that he will try to please nobody but himself—and to make the ha-ha's, as well as the rah-rahs, a part of his pleasure.<sup>27</sup>

SALVADOR P. LOPEZ

A man who is surely more famous for his serious political and critical writings is Salvador P. Lopez. Many are surprised to learn that Lopez did once upon a time write informal essays. His award-winning *Literature and Society*<sup>28</sup> is a serious book, but interspersed in its pages are a few personal pieces, some of which are among the most well-loved essays in the country.

His earliest essays were "Bouquet for Flappers," written in 1929, and "Echoes from Horace,"<sup>29</sup> which appeared in 1931. His four best essays would come later: "Leaves from a Poet's Vacation Journal," "21," "A Little Child," and "Letter to a Thoughtful Young Man."

"Leaves from a Poet's Vacation Journal"<sup>30</sup> was adjudged by Jose Garcia Villa as the best short story of the year, but it is a simple, touching essay, about familiar, elemental emotions. Lopez's speech is plain and unadorned, his mood serene. There is something about the countryside, its sea and sky and mountains, that renders the traveler, in this case, a son reunited with his kin, thoughtful and glad. From beginning to end, his magnificent restraint is sustained.

"21" is smooth, flowing, and vigorous. The words cascade as from the pen of an author inspired, and Lopez is. Upon being asked by a friend what age he would like to remain all his life, unhesitatingly, he answered, twenty-one. For

[it] is like standing atop a high mountain with the young sun shining full on your face and with all the stars of heaven singing together for your joy. There is a strange warmth in the blood like an accession to life, and there is a fragrance in the air like that of winds turned loose from undiscovered spaces. You look around and the beauty of the world is revealed to you in an instant.<sup>31</sup>

27. *Ibid.*, 10 September 1936, p. 20.

28. *Literature and Society* (Manila: Philippine Book Guild, 1940).

29. *Literary Apprentice* III (December 1929): 184-86; IV (1930-1931): 36-40.

30. *Literary Apprentice* V (1932): 43-48.

31. *Literary Apprentice* VI (1932-1933): 41-44.

Two years later, Lopez wrote "A Little Child Smiled at Me,"<sup>32</sup> a heartrendingly simple essay, that is perhaps his most famous. It initially appeared in his column, "So It Seems," for the *Herald*. "So Be It,"<sup>33</sup> which appeared in the *Literary Apprentice*, is a collection of eight informal pieces likewise from his column; they are brief incursions into being a romantic, the life of sensations, a visit to the country, on having a fever, astronomy, a sense of humor, counsels to a future son, and the function of a writer. Throughout, his sardonic cynical temperament, his philosophic bent, and an increasingly serious disposition display themselves. Of the world he says,

Inhabiting this cosmic prison we think of life as something great and noble, we rejoice in the shape, color, and savor of things, oblivious all the while that we are marooned in a little island surrounded on all sides by an eternal and impassable silence.

For such a plight, he gives two solutions: philosophy,

Take refuge in the philosophies that deny the reality of this sensible world. Nothing exists except as you conceive it in your mind; there is no evil but is born of us.

and literature, (his two original addictions), in which the writer

[invites] people to walk with him along the open roads of thought and secret alleys of feeling, talking of everything under the sun, allowing for differences of opinion, and respecting each other for all that.

The celebrated *Literature and Society* contains twenty informal essays in all. In "Letter to a Thoughtful Young Man" he exhorts a young friend to achieve harmony with life:

I mean by it the achievement of peace through the fulfillment of its laws rather than through their denial: taking life at the flood—loving, hating, agitating, fighting, drinking, eating, reading, writing, dancing—and when the tide begins to ebb, to accept that too, not with the resignation of the weak but with the courage of the strong.<sup>34</sup>

"Grace and strength and assurance" characterized the best of Lopez's prose; it was no wonder then that in 1938 the editors of

32. *Literary Apprentice* VIII (1935): 82-83.

33. *Literary Apprentice* XI (1938): 88-95.

34. *Literature and Society*, pp. 40-44.

the *Apprentice* pronounced him as "one of a number of reasons why English should be our national language."<sup>3 5</sup>

FRANCISCO ARCELLANA

As Francisco Arcellana's stories are marked for their restraint and excellence, so too are his essays, written for his column, "Art and Life" in the *Herald Midweek Magazine* from 1939-41. He wrote several narrative essays on mountain climbing, on his brief movie career, his frustrations in the U.P. Library while a student, and on Baguio. Then there were his reviews of art, theater, music, and dance. He was most lyrical when he wrote of things that touched him very deeply, like the very special relationship between a father and son, his love for the night, death, music and art again, honesty and writing, and life, of course, always.<sup>3 6</sup>

A lot of things can be said about these essays: that they are masterpieces of tact and precision, that for all their subtlety of effect, they look easy, almost conversational, that his writing everywhere was as controlled and fine and intense as some of the symphonies he loved and reviewed. Indeed, Arcellana is known to always slave over his prose with the passionate meticulousity of a gem cutter, grinding, polishing, reshaping, until every word and every phrase was right. For him, writing was very often a matter of rewriting. Even in the later essays of his "Through a Glass Darkly" column, written for *This Week Magazine* from 1928-38, there is the same magic and precision with words. We can say a lot of things about Arcellana and still it wouldn't be enough; to truly appreciate him, we must read him.

Thirty years later, looking back at these columns, Arcellana had this to say:

What I want to get down really is what I have discovered about these little essays. It seems to me that when I was writing these essays, the, what do I call my life line, my connection with what I think is the center

35. "End-leaves," *Literary Apprentice* XI (1938): 96.

36. "Art and Life," *Philippines Herald Midweek Magazine*, 16 April 1941, pp. 9-10; 30 April 1941, p. 9; 7 May 1941, pp. 9, 11; 31 July 1940, pp. 3, 12; 3 April 1940, p. 12; 10 April 1940, pp. 12-13; 17 April 1940, p. 12; 27 December 1939, p. 6; 20 December 1939, p. 6; 2 April 1941, p. 9, 11; 6 November 1940, pp. 10, 11; 29 May 1940, pp. 9-10; 18 September 1940, pp. 10, 11; 20 November 1940, pp. 10, 11; 15 January 1941, p. 10; 12 February 1941, pp. 10, 11; 21 February 1940, p. 12; 12 June 1940, p. 8; 12 July 1940, p. 10; 11 December 1940, p. 10; 5 February 1941, p. 9; 19 February 1941; 21 August 1940, p. 10.

of myself was unbroken. It was very clear and that I think explains the fluidity, the flowingness of these little essays.<sup>37</sup>

"Little miracles" are what he called these essays and they are that. His pure vigorous prose was everywhere present. His simple style was the happy result of the wedding of form and idea. Master of the short clipped sentence that tells all, his writing is undoubtedly the product of conscious creation in the full meaning of the word, that is, creation which is a painful process, a giving birth, a bursting forth. For him, as for Morley, none can better the sheer burning delight of that seizure that does sometimes come: "the clear flux of words, the steady push of thought emptying itself through that magical conduit of speech, the hope of some gusto and fecundity of expression."<sup>38</sup>

#### FEDERICO MANGAHAS

Finally, we turn to the two masters of satire, Federico Mangahas, and Amando G. Dayrit.

One of the earliest informal essays of this period was "The Pathos of Growth"<sup>39</sup> written by twenty-one year old Federico Mangahas, and which appeared in the virgin issue of the *Literary Apprentice*. Already, the vast difference in tone and style from Juan Collas's "The American Flapper" written five years before, is evident. It is simple, forthright, logical, and restrained.

This young Mangahas gives us no inkling of the later editor-journalist-satirist *par excellence*. The trenchant style, the ability to recognize irony in life situations are there, but little of the biting clever humorist at others' expense.

Mangahas, while in the University of the Philippines, edited the *Literary Apprentice* and was president of the U.P. Writers' Club. After graduation, he joined the faculty of the University of Manila, and made of the organ of that institution, *The Leader*, the leading literary magazine. His "Maybe" in the *Tribune* which he started on 11 September 1928, was regarded as the best column in the country. With the late Francisco Varona, he was co-editor of *The National Review*, and was a member of a group that organized

37. Interview with Francisco Arcellana, 2 March 1977.

38. Morley, "Inward Ho," in *Fifth Avenue Bus* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1936), p. 74.

39. *Literary Apprentice* I (December 1927): 5-6.

the Philippine Book Guild. He was also editor of the *Philippines Herald Midweek Magazine* before the war.

Mangahas's three important essays in this period are those in *Dear Devices*, "On Being Ashamed of One's Past," "A Note on Greatness," and "This Creature Called Columnist."<sup>40</sup>

"On Being Ashamed of One's Past" is about an author's blushing shame at his first published attempts. "A Note on 'Greatness'" is just that: some perambulating thoughts, as is the wont of a familiar essay, on what it means to be great. The best of the lot is on his "creature called columnist." Glib, racy, often funny and paradoxical, the essay is pure Mangahas. Here is the urbane moment and apt language which were rarely equaled in the writing at the time, except occasionally by Estrada and Lopez.

Spots of ironic humor characterize two other essays, "Are Teachers People,"<sup>41</sup> and "What Should a Nice Girl Think,"<sup>42</sup> combined with an otherwise straightforward, serious manner. A more personal piece, written in July 1939, but published two years later, is on "Doveglion in New York,"<sup>43</sup> when Mangahas went to the United States to attend the Congress of American Writers with Salvador P. Lopez and his wife.

Although Mangahas is primarily known as a columnist, journalist, editor, and satirist, his contributions to the field of the familiar essay are substantial. He is the earliest writer of this period to explore the genre, just as his "Maybe" revolutionized column writing in the country. His wry sarcasm, his clipped phrase, his sardonic manner have room in the informal essay as much as in his column. His irony sometimes "degenerates to outright bludgeoning," it is true, but then again it "thins and clears down to normal sincere prose."<sup>44</sup> His economical, expressive style is as distinctive as his satiric, somewhat skeptical view of things.

AMANDO G. DAYRIT

Satire of a different order came from the hands of the master humorist, Amando G. Dayrit. For most Filipinos at the time of

40. From *Literary Apprentice* VI (1932-1933): 104-6 (reprinted in *Literary Apprentice* X [1937]: 112-14); V (1932): 74-76 (under the pseudonym, Trinidad Reyes); *Philippines Free Press*, 5 November 1932.

41. *Graphic*, 8 March 1934, pp. 10-11, 54-55.

42. *Philippine Magazine* XXXV (October 1938): 472-73.

43. *Philippines Herald Midweek Magazine*, 2 April 1941, pp. 11, 12.

44. Highley, "On the Contemporary Essay," p. 2.



the Commonwealth, their day would not be complete without reading Amando Dayrit's "Good Morning, Judge!," the buoyant and boisterous front-page rib-tickler of the *Tribune*. Originally entitled "Court Notes," it ran from 27 July 1933 to the outbreak of the war. His daily "dig" at the big and small, the famous and the obscure, the solemn and the ridiculous, culled at random from the news of the day, was invariably humorous, frank, clever, and inimitable. "He hid his satire so skillfully under a cloak of good-natured humor that often its barbs were dulled by laughter."<sup>45</sup> Even the object of his ridicule enjoyed himself, and it is said that

one whom Amando G. Dayrit satirized most unmercifully in a magazine [of whom Dayrit] painted the picture of a bloated moron . . . went blithely about, distributing copies of the magazine . . .<sup>46</sup>

This was due to the fact that Dayrit wrote in a spirit of good clean fun, with malice toward none. Those were the days also "when men could smile over a joke on themselves and forget about it."<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, for all their effervescence and insouciance, Dayrit's writings were not the kind that last, for they were all about yesterday's news, which become stale after a few days. He wrote about petty crimes such as vagrancy, robbery, petty quarrels among the people; the favorite objects of his satire were President Quezon, the members of his cabinet like Jose Yulo, Jorge Vargas and Claro M. Recto, professors like Ignacio Manlapaz and Jorge Bocobo, and writers like Carlos P. Romulo and Vicente L. del Fierro. Among the common *tao*, Dayrit dealt with the man in the street, the ice cream vendor, the Chinese merchant, and the policeman.

Dayrit's humor is light, his satire puckish. He never skins his object of ridicule; at most, he inflicts discomfort on the victim of his wit, not pain. His satire is clothed with subtle, gentle, indirect, and good-natured humor. His ridicule and critical comments are concealed in the form of understatement, exaggeration, irony, burlesque, and invective.<sup>48</sup>

45. Roseburg, *Essays*, p. 159.

46. A.B. Rotor, "Introduction and Classification," *Literary Apprentice* IX (1936): 40.

47. Quoted in Armando J. Malay, "Amando G. Dayrit," *Pillars*, September 1944, pp. 39-40.

48. Georgina Giray, "The Literary Art of Amando G. Dayrit" (Term Paper for English 199, University of the Philippines, 1973), p. 81.

"Malacañan Masquerade or High Jinks at the Palace," illustrates this. Of Quezon, he wrote:

At fifty-two the vim and vigor of lust youth still pulsing fiery in his veins, and by all odds the most youngish President of any modern Democracy, he shows no signs of atrophying into the senility of old age. Circumstances may record him as a presidential failure, but history will long remember that he was one flashy tango dancer.<sup>49</sup>

This essay appeared in *The National Review*, a "civilized" magazine which the intellectual minority adopted as its own. Edited by Mangahas and Dayrit, it combined the political consciousness of *The Nation* and *The New Republic* with the satire of *The New Yorker*. That this was only some five years after the founding of *The New Yorker* and *The American Mercury* should not escape notice.<sup>50</sup> *The Review* published essays and reviews which were notable for their urbanity and wit. Unfortunately, it lasted for only a year, from 1936-37, Quezon having applied increasing pressure on its advertisers to withdraw their support.<sup>51</sup>

Surely, Dayrit's contribution to the informal essay lies in the quality of his satire whose ultimate value is to remind people that we are all human.<sup>52</sup> Pompous idiots and rat-minded crooks, the petty politicians, publicity-seekers and the peccadilloes that characterized the old regime were all victims of Dayrit's wit. Hans Christian Andersen once told a story about an emperor who walked in a parade stark naked. No one liked to mention it until a child called out, "Look, the emperor has no clothes on!" The satirist is an adult, not a child. Like Dayrit, he doesn't care whether the emperor is naked or clad; he simply calls out, "Look, the emperor is a man like all the rest of us . . . and perhaps a little worse."<sup>53</sup>

Dayrit goes one step further. It is so much easier simply to denounce than to laugh. That Dayrit could succeed in calling people ten kinds of fool to their faces in such a way that they didn't know whether to take it as a clean, honest joke or as a dastardly insult, until they finally ended up laughing with him, is no mean feat.

49. *National Review*, 10 April 1936, p. 22.

50. E. Aguilar Cruz, "Filipino Humor," *Philippines Quarterly* II (June 1952): 11.

51. Giray, p. 21.

52. Gilbert Highet, "The Pleasures of Satire" in *People, Places and Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 232-39.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

## CONCLUSION

The twenty-three-year history of the Philippine informal essay in English from 1918 to 1941 may be roughly divided into two periods: the early attempts at the familiar essay, from 1918-26 and the period from 1927-41. The first period was characterized by verbosity and sentimentalism; the young Filipino writer was still struggling with the essentials of writing like grammar and idiom. This is understandable, considering that Philippine literature in English was only one decade old, the first Filipino short stories in English having appeared in 1908, and the Filipinos having been introduced to the English language only twenty years before, when the American forces occupied Manila in 1898.

The second period, the charmed era of the 1930s, saw a phenomenal emergence of masterly and graceful personal essays. The reasons for this occurrence were: first, a heady proliferation of literary activity, not only in the essay but more so in the short story and poetry; and second, the feeling of general well-being, hope and prosperity in the country at large. The people were secure, comfortable, happy. In such an atmosphere, where foreign and local journals, newspapers and the government itself offered many incentives, writers' clubs sprang overnight, and literary men met often, discussed their works, literary techniques, and movements all over the world. American professors and dedicated Filipino teachers further encouraged the young writers. On the national level, the establishment of the Commonwealth, with its promise of eventual independence, inspired the writers even more.