

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Early Tradition: Philippine Writing in English 1910-1940

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 32, no. 4 (1984) 496–500

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

**The Early Tradition: Philippine Writing
in English 1910-1940**

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

**THE WRITER AND HIS MILIEU: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE FIRST
GENERATION WRITERS IN ENGLISH.** By Edilberto N. Alegre and
Doreen G. Fernandez. Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1984. xii,
333 pages.

Two books have made a significant contribution in fixing the tradition of Philippine writing in English. The first was *Brown Heritage* (Antonio G. Manuud, ed., Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967) and the other is *The Writer and His Milieu*. *Brown Heritage* was the first scholarly attempt to lay out the guidelines for the study of Philippine Literature and establish the critical norms by which it was to be judged. (*Brown Heritage* covered Philippine writing in both the vernacular and in English, but its treatment of vernacular writing, although among the first of its kind, was schematic rather than profound, and its chief contribution was in the field of Philippine writing in English.) *The Writer and His Milieu* is the first volume in Philippine literary history to venture into oral history in depth and to reveal the attitudes, critical beliefs and personalities of the writers themselves—the prewar writers in English who were the first to create the tradition of Philippine writing in English. The two books complement each other and they are landmarks of research into Philippine writing in English.

The Writer and His Milieu was first conceived in 1971 and eventually saw print as the first publication of the De La Salle University Press, supported by the Ateneo de Manila University, and endorsed by the University of the Philippines Creative Writing Center. Its authors Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez, have brought to the task of retrieving a disappearing tradition their considerable skills as critics and writers, coupled with their insatiable desire to find out what Philippine writing in English was, why and how it came into being, from the writers of the tradition itself. Francisco Arcellana in his Introduction to the volume calls it a “first, the first of its kind, a model of it. It is a tremendous work of collaboration” (p. iii). The

editors interviewed fourteen writers of the first generation in English—Paz Marquez Benitez, Casiano T. Calalang, Luis G. Dato, Angela Manalang Gloria, Leon Ma. Guerrero, Maria Kalaw Katigbak, Fernando L. Leño, Maria Luna Lopez, Salvador P. Lopez, Arturo B. Rotor, Bienvenido N. Santos, Loreto Paras Sulit, Jose Garcia Villa and Leopoldo Y. Yabes. The present volume is the transcript of those interviews. The one exception is the article on Paz Marquez Benitez who did not wish the interview to be recorded. “No tape recorders,” she said “but come as often as you like” (p. 3). (It was a felicitous exception, for Doreen Fernandez’s essay on the interview with Benitez is one of the better sections of the book. She has managed to capture Paz Marquez in a way that no recorded interview could.)

The most significant contribution of these interviews is that they have fixed the tradition of Philippine writing in English in the words and comments of the first generation writers themselves. Critics now know what these early writers were trying to do, what were the influences upon them, and what were the factors in the milieu which contributed to the growth of Philippine literature in English in such an amazingly short time.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The strongest (and strangest) element in the tradition of the writers of the thirties was the deliberate choice of language. Yabes wrote some years ago: “There is something uncommon in the not enviable situation of the Filipino writer in English and this is the insuperable problem of language But the writer doesn’t choose his language—no more than he chooses to write. It is surely an accident that the Filipino writer in English writes in English, a historical mistake” (*Brown Heritage*, p. 607). And, one might add, the language is a direct result of the environment or the milieu which produces the writer. For, as Isagani Cruz writes in his Introduction to this volume, these writers were “all educated in English, taught to think and speak and write in English” (p. iii). Almost all of the writers speak with some pride, one suspects, (Fernando Leño, for example, says that he and his classmates were fluent in English in first grade) of the American teachers they had in Grade School—Mrs. Townsend, Mr. Lawrence Cooper, Isaac Gorman and others. And almost all of the writers, of course, pay tribute to the English teachers at the University of the Philippines who brought them into contact with English. These were the giants, the pioneers of English in the Philippines, and their names echo like a litany throughout the interviews of all these early writers—names like C.V. Wickers, George Pope Shannon, Tom Inglis Moore, Professor Conklin, Mrs. McCracken and Mrs. Plummer. These were the teachers who gave the early writers a borrowed language. They also gave them content in English as well, for they brought them into contact with O. Henry, De Maupassant, Sherwood Anderson, William Saroyan, Edgar Allan

Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Sarah Teasdale, and a host of other American and English writers.

The interviewers made it a point to ask almost all of the writers their views on the somewhat paradoxical presence of English in the tradition. It is paradoxical, I imagine, for as Yabes says: "The life from which he (the writer) draws substance is lived in a language different from the language he uses" (*Brown Heritage*, *ibid.*). I may be misreading the interview, but it seems to me that the interviewers were more concerned about this problem than the writers themselves. S.P. Lopez commented: "We hadn't questioned it at all (i.e., the broad acceptance of English as a literary medium by the first generation of Filipino writers during the American regime.) Is that not strange? We accepted the fact that English had been imposed on our nation, and we had to get used to the idea and live with it" (p. 157). "We never questioned until much later, in the late 30s, the wisdom of choosing English When you think of it now, how absurd it seems" (p. 161). But for all of these early writers, English was a fact, and many of them migrated to UP because it was most hospitable to English (p. 161). Lopez raises the problem of a "colonial language" (p. 157) but he does not seem to have been upset about it at the time. Many of the writers talked about the Tagalog in their background and education, but, at least from the comments in this volume, they seem genuinely proud of their competence in English. Only Casiano Calalang, among the writers interviewed, seems to have raised the language question as a problem in his "How Shall We Write" (pp. 21, 28). The reader will have to judge for himself how much the interviewers were reading into Calalang's essay (pp. 21-23, 27-29). Wellek and Warren comment in *The Theory of Literature* that much of the writing on nationalism "amounts to no more than the expression of pious hopes, local pride, and resentment of centralizing powers" (Penguin, 1973, p. 52). I wonder if the absence of those factors, at least in the minds of these early writers, accounted for their ready acceptance of English. As Marra Pl. Lanot says in her review of this volume, "We may not begrudge them their Yankee heritage, but we must admit that theirs was a flourishing culture" (*Panorama*, 22 July 1984, p. 40).

INFATUATION WITH LANGUAGE

The second characteristic of the early tradition was the writers' "infatuation with language." Maria Luna Lopez says "it was just love for the written word. I used to copy beautiful expressions in my notebook" (p. 141) and Maria Kalaw Katigbak recounts how the young writers used to "talk up to 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning, just discussing trends and tricks of words, on nothing but peanuts and beer" (p. 99). It "was another plaything we used to have, vocabulary—how to use words" (p. 110). Bienvenido Santos says: "Remember we were drunk with language, with the sound of it" (p. 249),

and talks about falling in love with the sound of the English language (p. 219). It is truly amazing that in thirty years, one generation, these young writers were expressing themselves so well in English, a borrowed language. Hartendorp used to say that it was due to the "infinite adaptability of the English language," but perhaps not a little credit should be given, as Yabes says, to the genius and gift for language of the Philippine writers themselves.

It is clear in the interviews that all these writers of English in the early thirties were also very romantic and melodramatic—at least in their writings. Calalang says: "The Filipino writes in a sentimental manner" (p. 21). Angela Manalang Gloria talks about some of her poems as "sophomoric gooey-gooey," (p. 61) and others as "the outpourings of a bedridden bookworm steeped in the fire and passion of Spanish poetry" (p. 66). Bienvenido Santos says that Rotor is melodramatic: "It's old fashioned writing . . . It verges on the romantic, even melodramatic . . . Notice 'Dead Stars' and 'Zita.' Right now I don't think they would even be published" (p. 244).

Only one of the writers interviewed makes reference to myth and symbol (Bienvenido Santos, p. 249). It is, to me, a surprising omission. But it is due perhaps, to the fact that they were not asked about the relevance of symbols in their writing. I would certainly include symbols as one of the characteristics of the tradition created by these young writers in the prewar period. One has only to think of "Dead Stars," of "At Last This Fragrance," of "Soft Clay," or of "The Day The Dancers Came," among a host of other examples, to see the preoccupation with symbols among the writers of this early period. I would have wanted to discuss that aspect of their writing with almost all of the writers interviewed in this collection.

THE MILIEU AND THE WRITERS

The second great contribution that Fernandez and Alegre have made in gathering together these interviews of the writers of the thirties is to capture the background and the personalities of the writers themselves. They call it "a prodigious, lovely generation. And a very tough one that is difficult to equal" (p. xi). And they are right. It was a generation of writers that grew up in the right time and the right place. Central to their milieu was the University of the Philippines which was so "hospitable to English." Part of that milieu was the American and foreign professors at UP which had the advantage, as Lopez says, of starting from scratch in English and not having to shift from Spanish to English (p. 157). These were the UP Writer's Club, *The Literary Apprentice*, *The Collegian*, The Literary Guild, *The College Folio*, the Veronicans and the UP Women Writers' Club. Outside the campus there was a tremendous number of publications which were open to English literature and often edited by UP graduates. There were the *Free Press*, *The Philippines Herald*, the *Graphic*, the *Tribune*, *The Philippine Quarterly*,

The Philippine Magazine and many others in which these early writers found an outlet for their writing. But one will never be able to deny the importance of the University of the Philippines in the development of the early writers in English.

The editors have been able to bring out the personalities of these writers to a remarkable degree. "Until this delightful book one did not realize the very human persons behind the names" (Dimalanta, *ibid.*). Villa, Gloria and Calalang come alive in these interviews. Lopez is uniquely Lopez and Guerrero can only be Guerrero. There is a delightful story or memory on almost every page—Villa and his swollen feet being 'mothered' by Maria Luna Lopez (p. 151); Maria Kalaw Katigbak's notes on the *queridas* of well known Filipinos (p. 105); Angela Manalang Gloria putting her baby in a Carnation milk box because she could not afford a crib (p. 49); Yabes' memories of the Bachelorettes at UP who used to sit on the steps of Palma Hall, "some of them without . . . any undergarments" (p. 322); and Gloria's memories of how her first book of poems was censored (p. 45). This Ateneo reviewer must raise a quizzical eyebrow over Guerrero's comment that Ateneans learned the English language but they didn't learn how to write (p. 71). The readers will certainly be intrigued by Guerrero's and Lopez's anecdotes of diplomatic service abroad, and the contrasting views of Carlos Romulo. One must forgive the editors for misspelling N.V.M. Gonzalez's name throughout the book—an oversight that reviewer Marra P1. Lanot first noticed (*ibid.*). It is a minor blemish on an otherwise highly successful and provocative book. "This book succeeds because, more than history and biography, it describes personalities in a way which gives the readers a fuller sense of the realities of that era, a fuller because more intimate account of the order in which their works were written" (Dimalanta, *Panorama*, 22 July 1984, p. 14).

CONCLUSION

This is a delightful book—a masterpiece of Philippine literary history, as well as an entertaining portrait of some of the most interesting people in Philippine Literature in English. Alegre and Fernandez have made a significant contribution to Philippine criticism. But they have only made us want more. "What makes *The Writer and His Milieu* especially significant," Ophelia Dimalanta writes,

is that it is the product of the efforts not only of research-oriented scholars but also of critics, both of which Edilberto Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez are. Added to patient research and critical perceptiveness in a project that spanned a little more than ten years of conceiving, planning and realizing is the quality of imagination allied with sympathy, not just erudite grubbing . . . The result is oral history and more. (*ibid.*)

We look forward anxiously to the succeeding volumes in this oral history of Philippine writers in English.