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The Poets of the Philippine Revolution

MIGUEL A. BERNAD, S.J.

When Dewey entered Manila Bay in the early hours of Sunday, the 1st of May 1898, and casually gave the now famous order: "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley," he perhaps did not realize that he was destroying far more than the small antiquated flotilla that was anchored off Cavite. He was bringing about the end of an era and the beginning of a new order of things that affected many aspects of Philippine life, including the literary. Hitherto, the theme of the writers had been the tyranny of an old regime, the groans of a people, the need for reform. With Dewey's victory, a new theme began to emerge. It was a twofold theme, involving a backward and a forward look: backwards to the heroism of the patriots who had died for their country; forwards to the ideal of independence. That ideal for a while seemed close at hand; but it gradually receded into the realm of what then seemed unattainable.

It is easy to understand why Dewey's victory should have brought a feeling of wild joy to the Filipino people. They had fought against Spain in 1896 and 1897. A republic, antedating the Malolos Republic, had actually existed for nearly a year in Cavite; then, defeated in a series of pitched battles, the remnants of the republic's high command had found refuge in the mountain fastness of Biak-na-bato. Finally, in December 1897 -- only five months previous to Dewey's victory -- the republic headed by Aguinaldo had ended: not in surrender nor in defeat, but in a negotiated peace-pact which allowed both sides to retain honor, dignity and face. The negotiator of that pact, Pedro Paterno, has been reviled by recent historians, and it is undeniable that his motives were not entirely unmixed with

personal ambition; yet what Paterno had done was an adroit and honorable thing. It allowed both sides to end the war quietly and honorably, which is the business of diplomacy.

Yet while personal dignity and honor and face had been preserved, the objectives of the revolution had not been attained. Independence had been attempted and lost. The leaders were in exile — voluntary yet real. And the heroes, like Rizal and Bonifacio, were dead.

Then Dewey came. The Spanish fleet had ceased to exist. The Spaniards were bottled up in the Walled City of Manila. The rest of the country was free. Aguinaldo hastened back to Manila from Hong Kong, and on the 12th of June — 42 days after Dewey's victory — Aguinaldo appeared on the verandah of his house in Kawit and proclaimed the independence of the Filipino people. He then summoned a congress to meet in Malolos to draft a constitution.

It is not surprising that an emotional wave of joy and hope, of love for country and pride of race, should sweep the land and find expression in poems, stories, zarzuelas, and in newspapers that blazoned forth the newness of things: *El Nuevo Dia*; *La Nueva Era*; *La Libertad*.

La Libertad. — In this early period of national euphoria; a newspaper was started outside the walls — *extramuros* — of Manila. The publisher and editor was José Clemente Zulueta, who named it *La Libertad* — Freedom. The first issue appeared on 20 June 1898, just eight days after the Kawit proclamation. That first issue carried, under the penname "Dimas Indak", a poem which illustrates the twofold theme that we have mentioned: a forward look towards independence, a backward look at the national heroes. The poem entitled *La Bandera Filipina* was a salute to the new flag which Aguinaldo had brought with him from Hong Kong, fashioned by the Filipino expatriates there, and which he had unfurled in Kawit on the 12th of June.

Miradla! es nuestra bandera
que con su azulado tul
como el firmamento azul,
señora ondea doquiera.
Fué esa asta que reverbera

hierro de nuestras cadenas;
 la sangre de nuestras venas
 su ardiente banda rojiza,
 su blancura patentiza
 el lloro de nuestras penas.
 Look at it! That is our flag.
 The blue, like the sky,
 waves like a queen over her
 dominions. That shaking flag-
 pole is made of the iron from
 our chains. The red has been
 reddened by the blood from our
 veins. And the white is pale
 with grief from our sorrows.

The flag of course, though waving "like a queen wherever it pleased" (*doquiera*), did not really wave "everywhere", as the poet at once admitted. It waved from the church towers in Malabon, in Caloocan, in Navotas; it waved to the pealing of bells, the thunder of cannon. But it did not wave over the Walled City of Manila where the Spanish soldiers were embattled. The poet tells Manila to wake up:

Despierta, Manila; mira
 que la ondea en Malabón
 al retumbar el cañón
 un tumulto que delira;
 en las torres aérea gira
 de Kalookan y Navotas
 al son de armónicas notas
 y al repicar de campanas;
 y con resonantes dianas
 que van sembrando derrotas.

The poem ends with an invocation to those who had died for Philippine freedom:

Mártires de la libertad:
 Surgid de la enorme losa
 que en vuestro ser reposa
 radiantes de amistad;
 de la tumba levantad
 Burgos, Gómez, sin demora
 con Valenzuela y Zamora
 con Cristóbal y Rizal
 á ser siempre el pedestal
 de la Enseñanza redentora.

That was (to use a word much used recently) "triumphalist"

poetry of June 1898, born of the exuberance caused by the destruction of the Spanish fleet and the proclamation of Philippine Independence. But this euphoria soon gave way to more sober thoughts. The Filipinos seem to have taken for granted that the American fleet had been sent to the Islands merely to destroy the Spanish forces and to help the Filipinos gain their independence. Aguinaldo himself had returned to the Islands aboard an American war-vessel, confident in the assurances of support that had been given him by an American consul. It was not long before this naive faith gave way to serious doubts about the real intentions of the Americans.

Two things in particular gave substance to those doubts. One was the arrival in increasing numbers of troopships carrying American soldiers. The second was the way in which the American high command occupied the capital of the Islands, the Walled City of Manila. That Spanish stronghold had been ringed about by both American and Filipino soldiers. Yet when the Spaniards surrendered in mid-August 1898, it was not to the combined forces but to the Americans alone. Only American soldiers were allowed to enter Manila. Only the Stars and Stripes were hoisted over Fort Santiago. Filipino soldiers were forbidden entry into their own capital city, a city which they had helped to conquer.

The significance of those two facts — the American occupation of the Walled City and the continued arrival of American battalions, regiments, divisions — was not lost upon the thoughtful Filipino. It meant that he was in danger of losing his new freedom; in danger of merely changing masters — unless of course he were willing to fight again. This time, he would be fighting not to throw off an old yoke, but to preserve his independence.

La Independencia. — It was in this context, less than three weeks after the American occupation of Manila, that another newspaper was born. The editor was not a journalist. He was a pharmacist but with a very wide field of interests — well-travelled, well-read, strong-minded, strong-armed; also (being both an Ilocano and a Spanish mestizo) occasionally violent-

tempered. This was Antonio Luna y Novicio, whose brother, Juan, had already won laurels for the Philippines by his paintings in Europe. Luna's newspaper, printed at first in Mandaluyong and later aboard an itinerant locomotive, was significantly titled: not *La Libertad* (freedom) nor *La Nación* (nation) nor *El Nuevo Dia* (new day) but *La Independencia*. In the historical context, it was a fighting word: independence from *all* dominion, not only Spanish.

In recruiting writers for his newspaper, Luna did not turn his back upon the older and more established writers, like Pedro Paterno who had already published books including a volume of poetry. But Luna leaned more heavily on younger writers — like the 28-year-old Rafael Palma, or the 27-year-old Epifanio de los Santos, or the 25-year-old poet who already had a licentiate in law, Fernando Ma. Guerrero. There were even younger men. José Palma, brother of Rafael, was 22 years old. And Cecilio Apóstol, 21. There were others of various ages who wrote for Luna's newspaper: Leon Ma. Guerrero, Felipe Calderón, José Abreu, the del Rosario brothers, Mariano and Salvador. Some of them wrote under their own names. Others used pennames, a custom more widely used in the past than in the present. Fernando Guerrero was "Fulvio Gil"; Cecilio Apóstol used the name of a Roman poet, "Catulo"; Epifanio de los Santos was "C. Solon"; Mariano del Rosario was "Juan Tagalo"; Rafael Palma was "Hapon" — I presume it was "hápon" (afternoon) and not Japón (Japanese). These men of diverse backgrounds and very divergent attitudes (notably towards religion, towards Spanish culture and towards the Spanish friars) had two things in common: they were nationalists, and they had mastered the Spanish language.

There was a third thing which most of them had in common. Most of these men, along with the Lunas themselves, had undergone humanistic training at the Ateneo de Manila. This was certainly the case with the three poets we are about to consider: Fernando Ma. Guerrero, Cecilio Apóstol, and José Palma.

Guerrero's Patria. — While Dewey's victory and the proclama-

tion of Philippine Independence had brought about the introduction of a new theme in Philippine literature, it also intensified an old theme that had already been present in pre-revolutionary writings: namely a romantic love for the beauty of the land — its fields, mountains, rivers, lakes, the seas, the trees, the flowers — as well as an idealized image of the people with their picturesque costumes and folkways.

The first issue of Luna's *La Independencia* appeared on 3 September 1898. It carried Fernando Ma. Guerrero's best-known poem, *Mi Patria* — My Native Land. It is not impossible (indeed, it is highly probable) that the poem was an old one which Fernando Guerrero had written during his student days in the Ateneo, when every student had to produce verses to be corrected by the professor of humanities, or by that of rhetoric. Even if it had been written later, the idea must have been born during his student days when, from his home in what was then the small residential village of Ermita, Guerrero had to walk daily to and from school in the Walled City across the open fields of Bagongbayan. But even if the poem were an old juvenile effort, its publication in a new newspaper within three weeks of the American occupation of Manila and a few days before the opening of the Malolos Congress, must have electrified its readers and given to the poem a topicality which it did not inherently possess. The very word of the title — *Patria* — had connotations which it does not have today. It was the *patria* to which Rizal had bidden fond farewell in dramatic circumstances, only a year and a half previously. It was an adored land — *patria adorada*; even an idolized land — *patria idolatrada*. It was a land to be loved with the same tenderness that a man might have for a woman. Remember that mysterious, almost weird passage in the *Último Adiós*?

Y cuando en noche oscura se envuelva el cementerio,
y solos sólo muertos queden velando allí,
no turbes su reposo, no turbes el misterio;
tal vez acordes oigas de cítara ó salterio:
soy yo, querida patria, yo, que te canto a tí.

Rizal's *Último Adiós* is in fact a love-poem, his last love-song to the person whom he loved most: not a physical person, nor yet

a merely metaphorical one; not a mere figure of speech called personification. Rizal was in love with his native land and his native people, mystically united and personified under the name *Patria*.

Such were the electric tensions and overtones in Guerrero's title: *Mi Patria*.

Filipinas es un nido
formado de hermosas flores.
Es un idilio de amores
sobre un mar embravecido.
Es la impávida matrona
que, heredera de titanes,
tiene por solio volcanes
y centellas por corona.

That is of course beautifully lyrical. Yet there was a weakness in this lyricism. It was much too facile. Guerrero speaks of the dawn as an explosion of rubies:

Aquí son las alboradas
una ignición de rubíes.

Fine. Brilliant. But did it have the depth of what another man, writing a year and a half before, had said about the dawn?

Yo muero cuando veo que el cielo se colora.
(I die when I see the sky grow red with the dawn.)

Certainly Rizal, who could write a poem to the flowers of Heidelberg, would never have written of the women in his native land as "houris" so tender and so impassioned "that their looks could melt even hearts of ice; whose kisses could bring down heaven" etc. This was the kind of romantic nonsense that we find in Guerrero's poem:

Aquí son nuestras huríes
tan tiernas y apasionadas
que funden con sus miradas
hasta las almas de hielo;
que dan en un beso el cielo. . .

And so on. Unlike mature poets (which Guerrero would eventually become) this juvenile academic exercise (for that was all it really was) had the defect of the amateur. Guerrero did not see a mountain but mountains; not a particular dawn but dawns in general; not this or that flower, but flowers. What really is the

substance to the image of the Philippines being a nest constructed out of flowers?

Filipinas es un nido
formado de hermosas flores.

If and when Guerrero descends to the particular, he speaks not of an individual flower but a species. Predictably, it is the *sampaguita*, that beautiful but much-abused flower about whom every Filipino versifier and song-writer from Paterno onwards feels compelled to write.

But that was September 1898. Guerrero was a young law-graduate who as yet knew nothing of life. In the next twelve months he would learn a good deal. During the year 1899, when his country was at war; when towns were burned and people died in battle or under torture and when he himself like the other staff-members of *La Independencia* would run like the proverbial hare from the hounds, Guerrero would grow up to literary manhood.

All Souls' Day 1898. — But let us return to the year 1898. Forbidden entry into the Walled City, Luna and the editorial staff of his newspaper decided to organize a popular pilgrimage to a cemetery not far from the Walled City. It was to be held on November 2nd, All Souls' Day. Nobody could object to anyone visiting the cemeteries on that day — not even the American army whose headquarters were in Manila. The daily issues of the newspaper carried advertisements, inviting all to join in a pilgrimage “to pray for the souls” of the dead. The cemetery was that of Paco, where Rizal was buried in an obscure grave.

On that occasion, Luna's newspaper published a poem by Cecilio Apóstol, entitled “To the Unknown Martyrs”: *A los mártires anónimos de la patria*. He salutes these unknown heroes by a significant title. He calls them “priests of the temple of the Idea, and singers of the country's glory.”

sacerdotes del templo de la idea,
cantores de la gloria de mi patria.

That was in November 1898. Less than two months later, Apóstol was to publish another poem in which the same idea

was to be given more classic expression. It was the first of his two poems on Rizal.

Poems to Rizal. — In recent years there has been a determined effort to downgrade Rizal as a national hero. The alleged reason is that he had not been spontaneously chosen by Filipinos, but had been foisted upon them by the Americans. That is the alleged reason. The real reason is that he belonged to the middle class and was not a plebeian.

Whatever might be said about the real reason, the alleged reason at least is demonstrably false. Those who speak of the hero-worship accorded Rizal as American-made do not have a sense of history. I have spoken to an old man who had fought in the Revolution. He was not what we would call a lettered man. He hated Aguinaldo, because he was from Maragondon in the Magdiwang side of Cavite which was at odds with Aguinaldo's Magdalo. I asked him why he had joined the Katipunan and the fighting. He said they had been told that Rizal wanted them to fight. It happened to be false propaganda. But consider its historic significance. Rizal's name was used to induce people to join the Katipunan. An unschooled young farmer in 1896 had already heard of Rizal, and had already considered him a hero. Rizal was then still alive, an exile in Dapitan.

Or consider another fact. Aguinaldo, president of the Malolos republic, issued a decree, proclaiming 30th of December 1898 a special holiday. It was the second anniversary of Rizal's death. The proclamation was issued by Aguinaldo, who in less than two months would be at war with the Americans.

Consider a third fact. On 30 December 1899, the third anniversary of Rizal's death, when Filipinos and Americans were at war, a broadside was printed containing five poems in honor of Rizal. One of them was by Cecilio Apóstol. But that was not his first poem in honor of Rizal. He had written an earlier (and a much more widely known) poem the previous year, and it had appeared in *La Independencia* for 30 December 1898. That was the poem in which Rizal was hailed as "an immortal hero, a legendary colossus":

Héroe inmortal, coloso legendario,

emerge del abismo del osario
 en que duermes el sueño de la gloria!

And it was the poem that contained Apóstol's most celebrated lines:

Duerme en paz en las sombras de la nada
 Redentor de una patria esclavizada!
 No llores de la tumba en el misterio
 del español el triunfo momentáneo,
 que si una bala destrozó tu cráneo,
 tu idea, en cambio, destruyó un imperio.

Those are his best known lines. But the passage in which Apóstol expressed more fully and more poetically the controlling thought, deserves to be as well known:

cual si, al romper el ánfora de tierra,
 la esencia que en el ánfora se encierra
 no hubiera acaso de impregnar el viento.

The image is of an earthen vessel — a Ming or a Tang vase or even an ordinary bottle — which contains bottled up within it a precious perfume like the attar of roses. Break the vase, and the very winds become “impregnated” — made fecund — with the perfume. The application is obvious: destroy the skull, and the idea breaks loose.

Apóstol, then hardly twenty-two, was already a mature poet.

The National Anthem. — The next eight months were to be eventful. In January 1899 the Malolos Constitution was promulgated and the first Philippine Republic proclaimed. In February, an incident on San Juan Bridge triggered into an explosion the mounting tension between Americans and Filipinos. In the war that followed, the new-born republic quickly succumbed. In March, Malolos was captured; in April, Laguna; in May, Pampanga and part of Nueva Ecija. In June, Antonio Luna was assassinated, but his newspaper continued to be published by his staff. In its first anniversary, on the 3rd of September 1899, the paper carried a poem by José Palma. It was intended to supply words to the already existing music of the national anthem.

The story is told that when Aguinaldo returned from Hong Kong he brought with him the score of an intended national

march. Back in Cavite in early June, he summoned a local musician, Julian Felipe, and asked him to play the piece on the piano. The piece was a disappointment. A week later, Felipe returned with a composition of his own. It was played; it was accepted; and on 12 June 1898 when Philippine independence was proclaimed at Kawit, the new flag was raised to the tune of the new march. It was called *Marcha Nacional Filipina*. But it had no words. It was to fit this tune that Palma wrote the words which today are better known in English or Tagalog translation.

The National Anthem contains three themes — the same three that the poets were writing about during the period. One was the theme of beauty of sky, sea, mountain; the beauty of a sun-drenched land, a land of the morning:

Tierra adorada,
hija del sol de Oriente.

The second theme concerned the country's enemies: "Never shall invaders trample thy sacred shore";

los invasores
no te hollarán jamás.

Brave words, those. In September 1899 when the Anthem was first published and when it was first sung in Camiling, Tarlac, one-fourth of Luzon was already in American hands. Aguinaldo had had to move his capital from Malolos to San Isidro, thence to Cabanatuan, and thence to Tarlac; he was soon to move it to Bayambang, and then in November he would go into hiding and declare a state of guerrilla warfare. Who could hope to keep the invaders off the land? Yet they could sing with determination: "Never shall invaders trample thy sacred shores." A vain determination, perhaps, but real. The forty men or so who blocked the American advance at Tirad Pass, could hope to block it for only a day. Their bodies removed, the advance would continue. Yet they died defending the pass, as other brave men long ago had done at Marathon.

The third theme of the National Anthem was an echo of Rizal, who in turn had echoed the Roman poet. Horace had said *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*: It is sweet and proper to die for the native land. Rizal, echoing Horace — but with an

urgency that the Roman poet in the safety of his Sabine farm did not know — had said the same thing with greater concreteness:

ah, que hermoso es caer por darte vuelo,
morir por darte vida, morir bajo tu cielo,
y en tu encantada tierra, la eternidad dormir.

José Palma was echoing that sentiment in the lines which the students today sing, perhaps without much advertence, that it is their "joy" when there are enemies, "to die for the land."

Aming ligaya na pag may mangaapí
ang mamatay nang dahil sa iyo.

José Palma wrote when people were actually dying:

Tierra de dichas, de sol y amores,
en tu regazo dulce es vivir;
es una gloria para tus hijos,
cuando te ofenden, por ti morir.

Such were the poets during the Revolution. Of their subsequent careers we shall not speak here. José Palma died only four years after he wrote the National Anthem. His brother, Rafael, collected the dead poet's verses and published them in 1912 in a volume entitled *Melancólicas*, with a foreword by Cecilio Apóstol. Guerrero's poems were published two years later during his lifetime, under the title *Crisálidas*. Apóstol's were collected after his death by Don Jayme de Veyra, and published in 1940 under the title *Pentélicas*.