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## Balagtasan, by Zafra

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Miss Hau also contributes two lovely fictional works, "Stories" and "The True Story of Ah To," which trace the junctures and disjunctures of the past and present. Joaquin Sy writes graceful poems in Filipino, while Melchor C. Te has a story called "Ang Lotto" which glitters with the ironies of a de Maupassant story. The other works can be edited—their narrative lines made clearer, their images made sharper, their prose pruned. But then again, that may just be the unabashed formalist in me speaking.

Be that as it may, this book is a welcome addition to the monument of Philippine writing that is built with every book, every poem, story, essay, and play that we all write.

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**Balagtasán: Kasaysayan at Antolohiya.** By Galileo S. Zafra. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999. 281 pages

University of the Philippines Professor Galileo S. Zafra has just made a substantial contribution to Philippine literature by way of *Balagtasán: Kasaysayan at Antolohiya*, his first major critical work.

There are several reasons for this. First, it is the most definitive study on *balagtasán*, although Zafra was quick to admit the difficulty of retrieving the complete text of any oral tradition such as *balagtasán*. Second, it is not restricted to history and anthology. It also explores the rhetoric of *balagtasán* as essentially inseparable from its thematic concerns. And unlike other scholarly writings, it obscures the distinction between apparently trifling chronicle and in-depth textual explication, for Zafra himself moves easily from narrative to critique.

This book offers us a rare opportunity to rediscover *balagtasán*, the most popular literary form—and probably the national pastime—from 1924 till before the war.

The book's detailed account on the origin of *balagtasán* reveals that, just like any other form of cultural expression, the *balagtasán* is a product of history. But Zafra quickly disabuses us of the notion that the poet Francisco Balagtas and *balagtasán* are essentially one and the same thing. He adds, however, that the poet himself inspired the birth of *balagtasán*, primarily as a form of resistance against unwarranted colonial legacies. After all, much has been said and written about *Florante at Laura* as an allegorical masterpiece that subtly subverted the colonial order.

The book also explains how *balagtasán* evolved from the *duplo*, whose main aim was to liven up the bereaved. Zafra also emphasizes that one of the most significant features of *balagtasán*—as contrasted from the *duplo*—is its

elevation as a public performance where thousands often played an active part, say: in choosing the "Hari ng Balagtasan." Proof of this was an advertisement in *Liwayway*: "Ang Lalong Malaking Balagtasan ng Siglo, Gaganapin sa Stadium sa Linggo ng Gabi—Makikilala ryan ang Who's Who ng Balagtasan." This happened on 18 October 1925, at the Olympic Stadium in Avenida Rizal. The debaters included Jose Corazon de Jesus (also known as "Huseng batute") and Florentino T. Collantes. The former won over the latter, a rival onstage yet a dear friend in real life. The crowd was estimated at 8,000, or even 15,000. Among those who attended the said event were General Emilio Aguinaldo and other Malacañang dignitaries. It was also reported that there were spectators who came all the way from Tayabas (now Quezon), Laguna, Cavite, Bataan, Rizal, and Bulacan.

While it is true that its themes range from the trivial to the profound, enunciations, Zafra asserts that *balagtasang pampolitika*, in particular, revolves within its own socio-political context to address issues like independence, freedom, nationalism, and colonialism.

This is conspicuous even in several balagtasan about love or romance. In Benigno Ramos's "Balagtasan ng Kalayaan," for example, "mutyang kasarinan" was personified as Juan de la Cruz's lost beloved who was abducted by Tiyo Sam. Thus, the balagtasan was also influential in preserving our native language, literature and culture against the shapes and shifts of American colonialism. As the discourse proceeds, Zafra also affirms two of the book's many salient claims: that balagtasan is a specific positioning that recognizes the confluence of art and society, and that the core of the balagtasan argument stresses the significance of the native. These and other related assertions support the book's focal point: "Ang balagtasan kung gayon ay paghamon, pakikipagtalos—isang pakikipagbalagtasan—laban sa may kapangyarihan, dayuhan, at kolonyalismo."

Zafra also extends the political value of balagtasan within the context of an authentic encounter between the message and the public. Such encounter must be mediated by the notion of "talinghagang-bayan" as culled from our ancient and pre-Spanish traditions, Christian world-view, European and liberal thoughts, and American influences. As mental gymnastics, he likewise explains that the said literary form depends much on *siste* (wit), rather than on the strictures of logic. This, he claims, allows the public to think critically.

*Balagtasan: Kasaysayan at Antolohiya* succeeds, indeed, in giving us a comprehensive study on the balagtasan, although Zafra admits his failure to chart its evolution in the 1980s and onwards. Perhaps, such an inadequacy must be due to the dearth of materials.

What is indisputable is that Zafra can do the literary history in prose that is scholarly yet engaging it at the same time.

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