

FRANCISCO BALAGTAS and his "PLORANTE at LAURA"

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ALTHOUGH considerable amount of analysis has already been made of Balagtas' *Plorante at Laura*, many points as to its place in Philippine literary history still remain unsettled. In the question of attribution, for instance, the late Epifanio de los Santos Cristobal and Hermenegildo Cruz who, according to Pardo de Tavera "form the pair of the only authentic biographers of Balagtas," seem to differ greatly in emphasis. Mr. Cruz attributes the origin of *Plorante's* story to the poet's own life experiences, especially his first amorous relations; while Mr. Santos Cristobal attributes the general excellence of the poem, including its plot, more to the creative genius and talent of its author than to his transient passions. How much of truth there is in these two attributions, or how far both biographers have discerned the depth of Balagtas' power, only a thorough critical analysis of the poet's life and his work can determine. It may be sufficient for the present, however, to remember that the best of literary types are products of writers who have actually thought, felt, and experienced, not only their individual lives but also that of the society to which they belong. *Plorante* evokes feelings as genuine among the masses now as at the time when Balagtas wrote it. As a critic has aptly said, "the causes, objects, and events in any literary creation may differ at different epochs or periods; but since feeling will exist without object or event, literary productions must of necessity deal with specific

experiences even if they were so adroitly subdued or hidden." Balagtas was a creative writer whose motives had been modified by his social status, his class—i. e., the class to which he was emotionally and intellectually attached, from whose viewpoint he saw the world around him. It will be commonplace to explain here that his *Plorante* conceals realities, although to the eyes of the censors who authorized its publication, it contained only the most abstract metaphysical concepts.

Side by side with the unfortunate events of his life, between 1812 when he declared literary independence from his teacher in poetic forms, and 1838 when his *Plorante* first appeared in print, significant historical events were happening in Spain and in the Philippines. But while the spirit of liberalism gained ground not only in Spain but in other countries of western Europe, the idea of freedom, although allowed to dawn little by little on the Philippines, was finally suppressed by the reactionary elements in Spain, thus leaving, in addition to former chaos, the disturbing spirit of dissatisfaction, in the hearts of the Filipinos. And Balagtas, whose eager, suffering mind was sensitive to all that passed before his penetrating vision, proved himself the spokesman of his time. It may be added, however, that the political dissatisfaction of the people reflected in the denouncing lines of *Plorante* was characteristic not only of Balagtas' time; such dissatisfaction was more or less characteristic

of what the Filipinos had been feeling since the time of the arrival here of the Spaniards when the fatal stroke was dealt which sent Magellan to his grave. The same lines in *Plorante* were prophetic of the events which culminated in the death of Rizal and in the deafening cry for freedom at Balintawak.

Critical Confusion

PLORANTE at *Laura* as a poetic form has been carelessly misplaced in Tagalog literary history. There is a general acceptance of the fact that in form this masterpiece belongs to that type of Tagalog poetry which in other countries is known by the generic term "metrical romance." In the Philippines, however, this form of Tagalog poetry divides itself into two distinct types: the *awit* and the *corrido*. It is in the proper identification of these two types that confusion has existed for so long. From Toribio Minguella, down through Barrantes, Pardo de Tavera, Retana, and Maximo M. Kalaw, to present day critics and commentators, this confusion has persisted. Retana in his *Aparato*¹ . . . did not even mention the term *awit* but put his entries for this form of Tagalog poetry under the heading "corridos," "Buhay nang," etc., and "Salita at Buhay," etc., without making any formal differentiation as to its metrical composition or other distinguishing features. Barrantes and Pardo de Tavera were no better than Retana in this respect. Pardo de Tavera even advanced the idea that the term "corrido" was a corruption of the Spanish term "ocurrido," while Retana said that it was an adulteration or contraction of that word, although the dictionary² of the Real Academia of Spain tells us that *corrido* is a perfectly legitimate Spanish word, when it defines *Corrido de la Costa* as "Romance o jácara que se suele acompañar con la guitarra al son del fandango." Dr. Dean S. Fansler has helped to correct this confusion in his monograph on Philippine Metrical Romances³ by saying that "in Tagalog the term *corrido*, if strictly used, is applied only to poems in octosyllabic lines; those in Alexandrines (twelve-syllable lines) having on the title-page *Buhay nang*, etc. ('Life of,' etc.) or *Salita at Buhay* ('Story and Life,' etc.). The general Tagalog word for 'poem' or 'song' is *awit*. The other dialects make no such formal distinction between the *corrido* and the *Buhay*."

Dr. Fansler's distinctions are quite correct as far as they go. However, he does not discuss *awit* as a specific term commonly applied by the Tagalog to metrical romances in Alexandrines. The late Epifanio de los Santos Cristobal gave a more specific classification when he said that "The two great divisions of Filipino poetry are clearly marked in the Filipino bibliography. The *awit*, or chivalric-heroic poems, are written in Filipino dodecasyllabic verse or in Spanish double verses of six, and the *corridos*, legendary and religious poems, in Filipino octosyllabic verse" . . .⁴ The distinction expressed by these specific terms with reference to syllabic construction

is, however, not very clear to a number of students of Tagalog metrical forms. A more popular usage, quite generally accepted both by literary and lay readers of Tagalog poetry, has established the terms *awit* and *corrido*, not so much for their difference in metre as for the differences in air or music to which each is often set and in the amount of time the reader takes in singing or reciting it. The *awit* is set to music in *andante* or slow, time; the *corrido*, to music in *allegro*, or hurried, time.

Considering the fact that the line in the *awit* is longer by four syllables than the line in the *corrido*, it would seem natural to expect that the musical tempo should be inversely proportional to the length of the line in each. But such is not the case in Tagalog metrical romances, nor is it the case in other languages.⁵

This peculiarity may be explained by the reader's mental attitude when he undertakes to read each of these two forms of metrical romances. Observation, corroborated by students of Tagalog poetry, has revealed the fact that the *awit* is read mainly for the quality of its thought and for its beauty and sweetness of expression; the *corrido*, mainly for the plot of the story it tells. The direct ratio of the length of the lines over the time of the music for each form is thus quite evident.

From the preceding classification of Tagalog metrical romances, *Plorante* falls under the specific class *awit*. Only the keen artistic sense of Balagtas could have inspired him to write this poem in the twelve-syllable form. Only the greatness of his message could have impelled him to be so careful as to select the form which makes hasty reading quite impossible. With the nature of *Plorante's* theme, Balagtas could not have possibly thought of writing it in the *corrido* form. The true artist in him reveals through his choice of form a thorough knowledge of the human heart and a noble philosophy of life which he wanted his readers to study and thoroughly understand. The plot of *Plorante* is merely a vehicle for the conveyance of a great message.

Literary Strictures

ONE critic has pointed out that *Plorante* is replete with "neologism:" from the title-page to the last stanza of this poem, according to him, loan words are used for which pure Tagalog words might have been substituted. Another critic sees anachronism, though "reduced to its minimum," in the poem: there is apparent disregard of facts of natural and political history. Still another critic sees defects in the plot, and avers that *Plorante* is like other *corridos* (*sic!*) in this respect.

Much can be said in answer to the first criticism. But for the present, a statement of two facts will be sufficient: first, that the law of linguistic development sanctions the use of loan-words by any language that wishes to enrich itself; second, that while Balagtas used words that are not pure Tagalog, those