

The Vernacular Writer

by **Andres Cristobal Cruz**

THE FILIPINO of today is confronted with the alternatives that will determine whether he is to be liberated from the enslaving forces of Western economic colonialism, religious intolerance, and alien attempts at economic domination.

It will be a difficult choice; nevertheless he has to make it enmeshed as he is in a morally corrupt society, his national life threatened both economically and politically.

But while his Southeast Asian neighbors are redirecting their dedications towards their own national survivals, the Filipino has yet to decide on making the leap from an ancient bondage to a new freedom.

Having been alienated from his beginnings, because of his long subservience to the Western approach to almost every phase of

life, the Filipino is already beginning to forget that, as an Asian, he has his own system of culture and modes of expressions. He confuses between the Western approach to art which tenaciously upholds the individual, and the Eastern artist's belief in the universal; he is at a loss whether to identify himself with the Western artist who would anchor himself to earth in order to express himself to the littlest of details, or with the Eastern artist who goes well beyond himself, reaching out to the inscrutably unattainable by simply re-creating the essential idea behind the object.

Although it is presumed today that Filipino society and culture were magnanimously guided by both Spanish and American traditions, the Filipino people's basic way of life already enjoyed an

identity of its own in the pre-Spanish times. This is evidenced in the country's literary tradition that is rich not only in modes of expressions, but also in the intellectual and spiritual as well as in the aesthetic aspects of its message and value.

FROM THE AGE of magic incantations, folktales, legends, and ritual songs came a Filipino epoch of epics which reflected the confluences of the Malaya-Oriental cultures in the islands: the Vishayan epics *Maragtas*, *Hinilawod*, *Lagda*, *Harayaw*, and *Hari sa Bukit*; the Mindanao Moro *Bantugan*, *Indarapatraat*, *Sulayman*, *Daramoki a Bahay* and *Bidasari*; the *Dagoy* and *Sudsod* of the Tagbanwa-Palawan groups; *Parang Sabir* of Sulu; *Biag ni Lam-Ang* of the Ilokanos; the Benguet-Ibaloy epics *Kabunian* and *Bendian*; the Ifugao *Hudhud* and *Alim*.

However, because of governmental and academic neglect and indifference, the oral literatures of the past are dying in the memories of old men and women in the hinterlands and mountains who have received these epics from the past, but who now find no audience to whom to transmit a people's history and myth. To begin with, our primitive literature had no chance against the inroads of Christian indoctrination and orientation. Out of this

cultural and literary tampering resulted the works of friar-scholars, and later on, the introduction of literary forms evolved from a Spanish-Moorish civilization. Filipino priests wrote their versions of the Passion Play and as the metrical romances in vogue abroad were adapted, there began the period of *awits* and *corridos*, the first *comedias* or *moro-moros* that became the forerunners of the *karagatan*, *duplo*, *zarzuela* and the *Balagtasan*.

It was not until the Propaganda Period that Filipino literature's potential influence upon the thinking of the masses was to be felt. In *Plorante* at *Laura* Francisco Baltazar (Balagtas) allegorized the abusive practices of the Spanish friars and civil administrators. Dr. Jose P. Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* attempted to "reproduce the conditions of his country faithfully and without fear, raising away the veil that hides the evil." Marcelo del Pilar, Mariano Ponce, Antonio Luna, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Jacinto, and Apolinario Mabini, in words and deeds, generated the beginnings of a national self-awareness that eventually exploded in the violence of the Katipunan.

Then came the early American period in the Philippines which was characterized more by polemics than by significant advances in literature. Taking ideological positions on the current political

issues of the period were Sergio Osmeña's *El Nuevo Dia*, Rafael Palma's *El Renacimiento*, and Pascual Poblete's *El Grito del Pueblo* which, incidentally, were among the first newspapers. Severino (Lola Basyang) Reyes, Ananias Zorilla, and Aurelio Tolentino presented plays, while Cecilio Apostol, Claro M. Recto, Manuel Bernabe, and Jesus Balmori experimented successfully in traditional verse and prose.

Vicente Sotto, the Father of Cebuano writing, Buenaventura Rodriguez, Vicente Rama, Uldarico Alviola, and Piux A. Kabahar are to Cebuano literature what Eriberto Gumban and Magdalena Jalandoni are to Ilongo literature as Marcelino Crisologo and Leon Pichay are to Ilocano writings. Comparatively speaking, of the six major languages (Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilongo, Ilocano, Bicol, and Samar-Leyte) of a total of 87, Tagalog and Cebuano literature are richer.

For the contemporary Filipino vernacular writing, one looks towards the successfully circulated vernacular magazines, the "small magazines" and the house-organs come to existence before deadline time for the annual Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, and also in the campus literary pages. In them as in the English publications one finds a hybrid form of writing that finds sustenance in foreign stereotypes and

cliches. Both the Filipino writer in English or the Filipino writer in the vernacular, are faced with the same dilemma of their society: they have become strangers in their own land.

IN THE PAST there has been a divisive attitude between the Filipino writer in English and the Filipino writer in the vernacular. It was an attitude of indifference and snobbery. The Filipino writer in English ignored his counterpart in the vernacular who in turn, retaliated in equal measure. Incidentally some vernacular writers are under the impression that Filipino writers in English are a class higher. This is a misleading impression for in spite of the fact that some Filipino writers in English have been published abroad thru literary agents, they are, at best comparable to the beginner in the vernacular and to the established hack who will never be the artist because he has become a literary hustler.

Where then is the Filipino vernacular literature? Or to be specific, where is Tagalog literature of the present?

TO THE MAJORITY of Tagalog writers, the money is in radio commercial translations and advertising copies, in radio commentaries and soap opera. But the pot of gold is in the movies.

Towards this end, a lot of them are bent on attracting the attention of movie producers by slanting their literary output for filming potentialities. One is in fact, inclined to suspect that almost every Tagalog novelist has adapted his writing for movie prospects, forgetting the fact that cinematographic interpretation of the novel or story is the producer's and the director's job. This pernicious practice is further abetted, unwittingly, by the masses whose dictates at the box office ultimately decide the type of Tagalog literature in circulation.

In the field of poetry the contemporary output is lean as always. Tagalog poetry has a world of tradition all its own evolved from the incantations, the *salawikains* and *bugtongs*, the exhortative verses of the tribal groups, with a characteristic beauty, intelligence, and thought. That it should be bound with moralistic and reforming lines, and that it should limit itself to the conventional metrics is of course to be regretted; and there is little hope for a refreshing change as long as its practitioners refuse or are not able to strike out with experimental poetry. Fortunately, Alejandro G. Abadilla, Manuel Principe Bautista, Manuel Car. Santiago, and Gonzalo K. Flores have already attempted innovations in Tagalog poetry, with Abadilla providing the extreme in terms

of image and thought, while Eustaquio G. Cabras and Leonardo C. Diokno are doing the same with Cebuano poetry.

In the case of the Tagalog essay, the appearance of *Aliwan*, a Liwayway Publication weekly may yet provide legitimate outlet for its practitioner. It regularly features Emilio Aguilar Cruz's *Labu-labu* (Free for all . . .) and now and then Amado V. Hernandez's subtly humorous and anecdotal articles. In the past, the late Macario Pineda's column *Sabi ni Ingkong Terong* in *Ilang-Ilang* and also the late Jesus A. Arceo's essays provided thought and charm, while in his *Bagong Buhay* column Edilberto Parulan wrote on the imponderables of life. The last known collection of essays in Tagalog is Gemiliano Pineda's *Sanaysay* (Essays).

The year 1957 saw Tagalog literary rebel Alejandro G. Abadilla being cited by the Institute of National Language for his contribution to Tagalog literature as exemplified in his book of poetry *Ako Ang Daigdig* (I Am the World). Abadilla is a writer who astonishes his better-informed colleagues with his obstinate lack of background on even the writing trends of two decades ago. His reading are mostly confined to the D.H. Lawrence, Sigmund Freud, and Alberto Moravia school of sex and literature.

The year 1957 also saw the anthology of short stories *Maiikling Katha ng 20 Pangunahing Awtor*, published by Pangwika Publishing House, the main life-line of which is a fortnightly booklet of the latest song hits. As the Abadilla PBPPineda anthology was published "literature-wise" it had to contradict itself by selling its authors. Although it had complained about "commercial writing," the anthology published several which first saw print in *Liwawayway*.

LAST YEAR Pangwika Publishing House also published Alejandro G. Abadilla and Genaro Kapulong's *Pagkamulat ni Magdalena* which challenges the most Catholic of taste with an ambitiously handled theme of sex and nationalism. The original jacket design of the book is a brilliant example of ludicrously poor taste in book selling. No sooner was it offered to leading bookstores in the city than it was quickly asked to put on another jacket. The book has yet to be reviewed in context for all the commendatory statements well-meaning and polite, but less critical sympathizers have on the jacket flaps.

Last year, the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature prize stories from 1950 to 1955 were published between covers, the Tagalog short stories includ-

ed, thus providing a particular body of supposedly good writing in the vernacular.

Last year also the "Lubas sa Dagang Bisaya" an organization of Cebuano Visayan writers awarded prizes to winners of its first short story contest. The first prize of ₱150.00 went to Eugenio A. Viacrusis for his *Sagib* (Survivor); the second prize of ₱75.00 for Fornarina Enemencio's *Ang Kuwintas Nga Manol* (Sampaguita Necklace); and the third prize of ₱50.00 to *May Usa Ka Patay nga Punoan* (There's a dead tree trunk) by Diosdado C. Mantalaba. At present, there are only three magazines publishing Cebuano fiction, the *Bisaya* which has the widest circulation, the *Alimyon*, and the *Silaw*.

In December of 1957 this writer went on a cultural sojourn in the south to tape Cebuano poetry by the poets themselves, Cebuano songs, recitations and other pieces. The project was a personal one for the library of the Institute of National Language, but it is hoped that a Cebuano group in Manila may yet be interested well enough to sponsor the first public presentation of the tape-recorded materials.

WHERE IT isn't plain indifference or ignorance that hampers the florescence of vernacular writing, other causes just as des-

tructive and distractive could be found. The following is indicative:

A few months ago, this year, an editor for an anthology of Tagalog short stories asked a young writer for his piece. This particular young writer wrote the editor asking the kind of audience the proposed anthology would address itself to so he would know the kind of story he would send. He also asked quite frankly if there was anything to be expected by way of remuneration. Why is it? the young writer wrote, that when it comes to money matters we seem to feel shame . . .

In less than a week the answer came. The editor was offended and slighted and in so many words expressed the common, but unhappy belief that writers must not expect rewards, and that anthologies of such kind (addressed to students with the blessing perhaps of the Textbook Board) do not profit. The young writer sent his piece written as the phrase goes "in blood and sweat and tears." But it came back with a piece of note, unsigned, from the editor saying that the manuscript came too late for the press. This in less than a month and a half-time!

Many writers in Tagalog, particularly among the elder ones, believe in the myth of the writer as a bohemian, with a lean and

hungry look, and as a special kind of person with tendencies of a psychopath. For him a lot of girls must fall, he must more or less hug the bottle as often as possible, and he must be regarded as one blessed with the gift of the gods from Olympus. A criticism of their work is considered a personal offense and he who offended must suffer the consequences—ostracism and back-stabbing, a prejudice of long standing against the offender's life and works past and present and in the future.

If among Filipino writers in English there have been cliques and coteries of various hue and cry, the worst can be found among writers in Tagalog where there is so much boasting going around, "to much wind," to use a vernacular image, but very little writing really to be truly proud about. The pride is illegitimate: it merely hints an excuse for having nothing really of worth. Even those who savagely decry against so-called commercial writing are merely rhetorical, never aesthetic, nor at the least, artistic about it.

OVERBEARINGLY disgruntled for no reason at all, the young writers in Tagalog behave like literary juvenile delinquents. By their manuscripts, one can deduce that they are suffering from the wrong impression that to imi-

tate this author's style or that one's technique, is to assure publication. Imitative without knowing why they spend so little time keeping their third eye on their story. Most of the beginning writers do not seem to realize that even editors can get fed up with the same themes and subjects and manner of writing. They have a remarkable tendency to be shallow and not even entertaining.

When not engaged in bickerings our so-called established writers in Tagalog are either busy with social functions or with the mirror of their achievements. Some of them can be as immature and shallow as the young, blindly eager ones because they refuse to grow within, to be involved in the daily realities of life; or that having had no personal crisis or crises they remain emptied, after several accidental writings. That too much generous friendship tends towards cliches in spirit and aims responsible, in turn, for a clique of writing is harmful and should not be overlooked.

Those who keep on, among the young and the old, are those who labor quietly and slowly and are never bothered if the editor's frame of mind for the moment reflects a lack of understanding of the recent criteria for effective, wholesome and worthwhile writing and also a suspicion of any new style, which is termed

"literary writing" when it is just plain old fashioned good writing, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

IN 1958, THE LIWAYWAY Publications organized and opened a writing workshop in the company resthouse in Cabcaben, Mariveles, Bataan for staff members. With the modest opinion that "even so-called popular writing should be written well," A. C. Fabian, general manager and novelist and the Liwayway writers intended to write several months' supply of stories so that after a time the writers can take it easy on their own pieces as well as encourage young and new writers. Story-wise and reader-wise there is an informally serious discussion before or after a story is written. During one of these discussions at the Cabcaben workshop the need for fortifying the skeletal Tagalog short story by effective characterization, dialogue, description was pinpointed. Thereafter, improvements in vernacular stuff can be expected. The workshop is the only one of its kind in the country, and perhaps in the whole Southeast Asia.

Comparatively speaking, Filipino writers are paid higher than writers in Southeast Asia, excluding Japan where writers could live on the patronage of their audience.

TAGALOG WRITING has again earned added lustre by the return of Amado V. Hernandez to a re-invigorated writing. His short stories and his articles happily bring a new hope for honest-to-goodness, uncluttered writing. His play "Muntinlupa" won the first prize last year in the Palanca Awards. Fortunately, the vernacular comics (and the movies) have not claimed him yet for its next votary as it had Clodualdo del Mundo who, in spite of becoming a threat to Mars Ravelo, the undisputed dean of Tagalog comics writers, still maintains a sensible and sensitive critical eye.

1958 also saw the founding of the *Kilusang Makabansa* (Nationalist Movement) headed by Jose Domingo Karasig, an organization advocating patriotic support of Filipino lifeways, and of the *Kapatiran ng Mga Alagad ng Pambansang Wikang Pilipino* (KAPAWIPI) for the dissemination and enrichment of Filipino art and culture with an awe-inspiring ceremony and symbology not unlike that of Freemasonry. The KAPAWIPI was conceived by Jose Joson Santoyo and Lazaro Francisco, both writers of note, the latter being one of the very few who command respect for uncompromised novels with a broad base of social awareness.

The year 1957-'58 has served to indicate more positively new

trends in vernacular literature. For one thing, vernacular writing is coming to terms with the human condition and the social situation; the craft of fiction among vernacular practitioners is slowly being examined in spite of an acute absence of textual criticism on the best existing materials. Happily for the vernacular writer, he has no critic to worry about, except the board of judges of the Palanca Awards.

It remains for the vernacular writer to define, with ethical consciousness, human experience either personal or societal from an emotional and intellectual distance, controlling it with consummate artistry and with organic unity. He has to have firm conviction on human folly and wisdom, human stress and strain as he lives and as he works, guided by the one obligation of his creative gift: to do what he has to do in terms most suited to his specific utterance.

When the Filipino writer, either in English or in the vernacular finally comes to believe in the potent force of literature, when he preserves with humility and frankness the written hopes and aspirations of his generations and by these learn and live and be free, when he becomes deeply aware of the things within him and without, when in his prose and in his poetry he learns to find, as his countrymen did, the

deathless and telling record of the rise of the Filipinos from their beginnings in the love of God, of man, of country, and find

these again, then and only then can he rededicate himself as an artist and as a Filipino to Art and to Life.

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Big Wine Plant Discovered Near Well of Gideon

A wine-making plant, complete with storage space for a total of 30,000 gallons of wine, has been found near the famous well of Gibeon, at the modern village el-Jib, Palestine.

The 2600-year-old winery, probably the oldest in the world, was discovered when handles from wine jars found in the well suggested further investigation. Each handle bore the name and address of the maker of the wine, indicating that ancient Gibeon was a wine industry center.

In the course of excavation, 28 unusual small vats were found cut out of limestone bed-rock. Each one has a small opening of about 29 inches in diameter that could be covered with a stone. Each measures about six feet in diameter and averages seven feet, four inches in depth. The scientists decided they had served as cellars for storing and aging the wine.

Stoppers for the jars also turned up, but the scientists were reasonably sure these could not have provided the air-tight seal to keep wine from spoiling.

A wine maker at a nearby monastery provided a possible answer. If olive oil is poured on top of wine in a jar or bottle, a seal is provided, he said. The finding of two olive presses on the site confirmed this answer.

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