

# Modernity/Modernism in Philippine Literature

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## Abstract

*When the American colonial regime set up the Philippine public school system in the first decade of 1900s, it installed a curriculum that was heavily based on the American educational system. The English literature and humanities curriculum, in particular, was heavily Anglo-American notwithstanding the Filipinos' lack of proficiency in the English language in the early years. By the third decade of the American occupation, the Filipinos who had been able to attend the university in the country and abroad and had developed a higher level of competence in the English language, began to produce writers and critics who had been trained formally in the Anglo-American literary and critical modes. This generation produced the first Filipino "modernist" writers, who would later constitute the canon of Philippine Literature.*

*Soon after, Filipino writers in Tagalog and the other Philippine languages began to develop a taste for modernist writing as well and soon produced their own kind of "modernistas." Ironically, as Americanization in literature developed inroads in Philippine letters in the major languages, Filipino writers in English and Philippine languages, specifically, were to be split into two camps, the "art for arts' sake" camp (the modernists), led by Jose Garcia Villa, and the socially oriented camp (the socially oriented writers) led by Salvador P. Lopez. The first claimed to be heir to Anglo-American-modernist writers whose works they had read; the second were said to be heir to the local tradition of socially-oriented writings in Philippine literature which tradition they ostensibly wished to keep alive. Numerous polemical exchanges would ensue from the 1900s to the 1940s shortly before World War II, which were published in the daily newspapers and weekly magazines. The polemics would embody the contradictions as well as the ambivalences of the Filipino writers' reception of Anglo-American literary "modernism," outline the contours of "modernism" in Philippine literature, and underscore the continuing unease that Filipino writers today, especially those writing in Philippine languages, about "western" modernism, and the desire to go past it, resulting in the development of a complex if contradictory kind of modernism and a sense of modernity and the role of language in this development.*

**Key words:** *modernity, modernism, Philippine literature*

## Introduction

In the Philippines, often referred to as the first "modern" nation in Southeast Asia, and the only former Asian colony of the United States, modernism and modernity are inextricably linked and loosely interchangeable yet are distinctly and diversely inflected in incommensurably uneven, overlapping and contradictory ways.

First, it is said that as a result of "modern" western European and Anglo-American hegemonic imperatives upon postcolonial societies, dominantly through the setting up of the colonial public educational system, "modernity" - as a social and historical phenomenon - has weakened or destroyed traditional beliefs and practices of non-western societies as the people themselves are decimated by colonialism. However, historically, such imperatives have had to deal with existing local traditions,

languages and practices, nonetheless producing “modernities” and “modernisms” of differentiated characteristics and uneven development across the different Philippine languages. This is exemplified by the diverse development of “modern” genres in the Philippines like the Filipino novel written in the different local languages which ranges from the integrative classic realist “modern” types to the discrepant hybrid varieties of pre-modern (traiditional) to postmodern (contemporary) varieties.

Second, it is posited that as a cultural and artistic response to modernity, “modernism” embodies cultural practices which are disjunctive of practices that fetter and habits that bridle. However, to “make new” is not simply an aesthetic response but a deeper and more sweeping reaction to the experience of modernity, embodying appropriative, as well as abrogative or aesthetically transgressive in Philippine literature. This is exemplified by such writers as Alejandro G. Abadilla (Tagalog) and Jose Garcia Villa (English)

### Abadilla

In 1935, the Tagalog writers’ group called *Kapisanang Panitikan*, organized as a reaction to *Ilaw at Panitik*, an earlier writers’ group, published a literary magazine, *Panitikan*, in 1938. Its members staged a revolt against the worsening commercialism of local magazines, rampant use of clichés and formulaic repetition of old literary forms and worn-out conventions. They demanded artistic freedom to innovate in theme and technique and led the efforts for artistic experimentation in Tagalog writing. The group, which included Alejandro G. Abadilla, Teodoro Agoncillo, Clodualdo del Mundo, Brigidito Batungbakal, Jesus Arceo, Salvador Barros, and Genoveva Edroza-Matute, publicized its cause with a book-burning rally at Plaza Moriones in Tondo on 02 Mar 1940, referring to themselves as “radical but aristocratic.” The group threw into the flames literary works they considered “unfit to be passed on to posterity.”

The leader of the “literary rebels” was Abadilla, whose use of free verse, defiance of

literary convention, and commitment for individualist, avant-garde sensibility in art and knowledge paved the way for the release of new aesthetic energies among Tagalog poets. *Panitikan* was

*...determined to be “modern,” in the sense that it was to diverge from traditional along lines being pursued by the writers of Philippine English literature. (Lumbera, 2007: 97)*

The poem, “Ako ang Daigdig,” is said to have declared a kind of poetic mutiny and social insurrection in protest of protest of hypocrisies in conventional society that had made a as he stripped his verse of rime and meter of the dominant conventional Tagalog versification.

Abadilla was arguably a crusader for freedom, like Villa, who resisted all conventional social and artistic restrictions like a personal war. Assuming a mythical “real self,” he believed that individual freedom could be achieved through disengaging himself from other men. Individualistic in temper, he was obsessed by the self only because he believed individuals true to themselves would usher a better society. Later on, his experimentation with free verse would prepare the way for its acceptance by younger poets, who would then go beyond his theme of individualism while acknowledging his formalist innovations

### AKO ANG DAIGDIG

Ni Alejandro G. Abadilla

i.  
ako  
ang daigdig  
ako  
ang tula  
ako  
ang daigdig  
ang tula  
ako  
ang daigdig  
ng tula  
ang tula  
ng daigdig  
ako

ang walang maliw na ako  
ang walang kamatayang ako  
ang tula ng daigdig

**ii.**

ako  
ang daigdig ng tula  
ako  
ang tula ng daigdig  
ako ang malayang ako  
matapat sa sarili  
sa aking daigdig  
ng tula  
ako  
ang tula  
sa daigdig  
ako  
ang daigdig  
ng tula  
ako  
ang daigdig

**iii.**

ako  
ang damdaming  
malaya  
ako  
ang larawang  
buhay  
ako  
ang buhay  
na walang hanggan  
ako  
ang damdamin  
ang larawan  
ang buhay  
damdamin  
larawan  
buhay  
tula  
ako

**iv.**

ang daigdig  
ako  
sa tula  
ako  
ang daigdig  
ng tula  
ako  
ang daigdig  
ako  
ang tula  
daigdig  
tula

ako.

(1940)

***I AM THE UNIVERSE***

*By Alejandro G. Abadilla*

**i.**

i am  
the universe  
i am  
the poem  
i am  
the universe  
the poem  
i am  
the universe  
of the poem  
the poem  
of the universe  
i am  
the unending I am  
the undying I am  
the poem of the universe

**ii.**

i am  
the universe of the poem  
i am  
the poem of the universe  
i am  
the free I am  
true to myself  
to my universe  
of the poem  
I am  
the poem  
in the universe  
i am  
the universe  
of the poem  
i am  
the universe

**iii.**

i am  
the feeling  
free  
i am  
the image  
alive  
i am  
the life  
without end

i am  
 the feeling  
 the image  
 the life  
 feeling  
 image  
 life  
 poem  
 i am

**iv.**  
 the universe  
 i am  
 in the poem  
 i am  
 the universe  
 of the poem  
 i am  
 the universe  
 i am  
 The poem  
 universe  
 poem  
 i am.

(1940)

Translation: Bienvenido Lumbera

### Villa

But among English writers, unrest was pervading the literary atmosphere as well. On one side, there were the *Veronicans* – also organized in 1935 by those who were believed to have stood for art for art's sake, like Jose Garcia Villa, forming another avant-garde group of Filipino writers. On the other hand, there were those who urged their fellow writers in English to create a more socially engaged art, like writers Salvador P. Lopez, Federico Mangahas, Arturo Rotor, and Manuel Arguilla, who became the stalwarts of the Philippine Writers League. Coming mainly from the University of the Philippines, and elite universities based in Manila, the English writers were urged to commit to great social responsibility even as they also sought for artistic freedom; on the other hand, Tagalog writers, coming out in commercial publications, were admonished to raise aesthetic standards even as it was tacitly assumed that their works should also serve social ends.

A powerful voice as a avant-garde artist, critic, modernist poet, fictionist, Jose Garcia Villa is known for his technical innovations of “reversed consonance” in *Have Come, Am Here* (1942), for example, and “comma poems” in *The Anchored Angel*. His poems deal with angelic rebellion, the solitary genius, and artistic exceptionality reminiscent of Wallace Stevens, or e.e. cummings. It had been said that Villa was able to do “much to establish Philippine writing alongside Tagalog and Spanish literatures” which had obviously longer histories behind them.

He introduced a new rhyming scheme called “reversed consonance” wherein, according to Villa: “The last sounded consonants of the last syllable, or the last principal consonant of a word, are reversed for the corresponding rhyme. Thus, a rhyme for near would be run; or rain, green, reign.” In 1949, Villa presented a poetic style he called “comma poems,” wherein commas are placed after every word.

### First, A Poem Must Be Magical

Jose Garcia Villa

First, a poem must be magical,  
 Then musical as a seagull.  
 It must be a brightness moving  
 And hold secret a bird's flowering  
 It must be slender as a bell,  
 And it must hold fire as well.  
 It must have the wisdom of bows  
 And it must kneel like a rose.  
 It must be able to hear  
 The luminance of dove and deer.  
 It must be able to hide  
 What it seeks, like a bride.  
 And over all I would like to hover  
 God, smiling from the poem's cover.

### Fragment

Jose Garcia Villa

Anchored Angel  
 And,lay,he,down,the,golden,father,  
 (Genesis',fist,all,gentle,now).  
 between,the,Wall,of,China,and,  
 The,tiger,tree(his,centuries,his,  
 Aerials,of,light)...  
 Anchored,entire,angel!

He,in,his,estate,miracle,and,living,dew,  
His,fuses,gold,his,cobalts,love,  
And,in,his,eyepits,  
O,under,the,liontelling,sun—  
The,zeta,truth—the,swift,red,Christ.

Villa is known for having fought almost singularly for “art for art’s sake,” and for his insistence upon the autonomy of art from society (Lumbera, 2007: 96). It must be noted, however, that against such aestheticism, some of his contemporaries writing in English believed instead in “proletarian literature” and in using the pen as a weapon for social change.

In Philippine literary history, this particular development towards the aesthetic, as exemplified by Villa, is said to have constituted a “radical break from tradition,” as despite linguistic, generational or even linguistic and ethnic divisions, Spanish writing and literatures in the various Philippine languages had been mostly respectful of a more socially-conscious tradition in the long history of literature.

Third, while modernism is usually understood as a set of literary techniques and attitudes rooted mainly in Anglo-American avant-garde aesthetic and literary movements as these had influenced literature by Filipinos through American colonial education, in the Philippines, modernism is a conjuncture of diverse fields of forces in the Philippines, at once literary and non-literary, local and foreign, formalist and political, so that one might refer to modernisms (plural) rather than modernism (singular). In the context of the country’s struggle for self-determination under Spanish colonialism, then, American colonialism, through the Commonwealth Period, and then under the Japanese Occupation, “non-literary” themes of nationalism and social justice understandably inflect Philippine modernism/s. This is illustrated by noted writers during the Commonwealth Period, Salvador P. Lopez (English) and Benigno Ramos (Tagalog) in whose writings modernism is equally politically transgressive.

## Modern Literature and the Philippine Commonwealth

The Tydings-McDuffie Act presented the promise of freedom from colonial bondage under American “tutelage.” With the Philippine Commonwealth Period (1935-1946), described by some historians as ushering in the birth of the modern nation, Filipino preparations for self-government were underway. Finally, independence seemed truly within reach.

After being referred to only as “Las Filipinas” for centuries as a colony of Spain, and as the “islands” as an American territory, this time, a vision leading to a unified, modern, democratic, and sovereign nation was within the realm of possibility, indeed – a country, finally, to be forged under the flag, “the Philippines.” Between speeches and propaganda of both the American colonial and Philippine Commonwealth leaderships, an image of a prosperous, progressive would-be-nation under a sovereign state was being painted everywhere in the media – happy, satisfied citizens living in egalitarian peace and harmony. In Philippine public schools, such polemical colonial atmosphere was accompanied by the developing canon under American tutelage ranging from Irving and Longfellow to Shakespeare, Poe, and Matthew Arnold.

In fact, the country was disintegrating into chaos, as it faced widespread unrest. In a number of provinces, the peasantry had been in revolt against the age-old inequities of the feudal *caciquismo*. The promises of agrarian reform in huge friar lands by the Philippine Revolution to which they had given up their lives, had come to naught. Now, neither having land nor independence, they continued to be enslaved even under a so-called democratic system that promised freedom and equality for all, but which remained unjust and oppressive – a commonwealth government that could not protect the very people from the very roots of their centuries-old oppression. Thus, as they had done before, the peasants clamored for agrarian reform once more even as the struggle for independence was being waged. The Muslims of Mindanao, the country’s

second biggest island, as it had been for centuries, were fighting mightily for cessation as ever despite American colonial efforts at integrating them. (Constantino, 1975: 342-383)

### Ramos

Although workers in factories had held numerous strikes within and around Manila in open defiance of both capitalists and the government, bearing powerful witness to this struggle was the *Sakdalista* movement. The *Sakdalistas* were farmers who had been fighting for the break-up of the *hacienda* system and the oppressive usurious practices associated with it, which had been instituted during the Spanish colonial era, only to continue to be perpetuated under the Americans. This movement was founded in 1930 by Benigno Ramos, a noted writer in Tagalog and a well-known pro-independence peasant leader, who had worked at the office of Manuel L. Quezon, the President of the Commonwealth of the Philippines. He resigned from his office when in 1930, he led a strike by teachers in opposition to the Commonwealth leadership; later, he formed the *Sakdalista* movement which was perhaps the peasant movement with the most widespread influence of the period. A fine writer himself, he established a Tagalog language newspaper called *Sakdal* which became popular among peasants. (Constantino 367-370)

Ramos belongs to a long tradition of politically engaged writers in Philippine literary history beginning with the national hero, Jose P. Rizal (Philippine national hero but also referred to as the father of the modern Filipino novel), who had led the cause of social justice and patriotism. As a poet in Tagalog, despite his mastery of poetic conventions, Ramos is known for being a precursor in the use of modernist poetic techniques specifically in his innovations in versification earlier on in his writings at a time when, by and large, Tagalog poetry was deeply steeped in the conventions of traditional poetics, derisively referred to today by Tagalog *modernistas* as *Balagtasismo*. Although his poems had not been as widely published as his

contemporaries during his lifetime, he is currently so highly regarded by literary historians that it has been said that his poetry “ought to rank him among the major poets of the Tagalog language.” But unlike the younger avant-garde poets, his later poems especially were politically purposive as these made his poems “easily accessible to the masses in whose service he had placed his art” (Lumbera, 2007: 101). Clearly, his modernism is both aesthetic and political. Ramos’ literary creed is embodied in his famous poem, *Panulat*,” whose tropes speak of the role of literature in the struggle for national emancipation and social justice.

### PANULAT

ni Benigno R. Ramos

Kung ikaw, Panulat, ay di magagamit  
Kundi sa paghamak sa Bayang may hapis,  
Manong mabakli ka’t ang taglay mong tulis  
Ay bulagin ako’t sugatan sa dibdib.  
Kung dahil sa iyo’s aking tutulongan  
Ang nagsisilait sa dangal ng Bayan,  
Manong mawala ka sa kinalalagan,  
At nang din na kita magawang pamaslang!...  
Di ko kailangan na ikaw’y gamitin  
Kung sa iyong katas ang Baya’y daraing,  
Ibig ko pang ikaw’y magkadurug-durog  
Kaysa magamit kong sa Baya’y panlubog.

Sa bawat anak mo ay itinatanim  
Ang dati mong hapis at aping damdamin,  
At bago mamatay, ang iyong habilin  
“Iyong ating lupa’y pilitin mong kunin.”  
Kailangan kita sa gitna ng digma  
At sa pagtatanghal ng bayaning diwa,  
Hayo’t ibangon mo ang lahat ng dukha  
Hayo’t ibagsak mo ang mga masiba!  
(1930)

### PEN

By Benigno R. Ramos

My pen, if your only use  
is to cast dishonour on my unhappy country,  
may you break into two and may your point  
pierce my eyes and wound my heart.  
If I’d be adding my voice through you  
to those that malign my country’s good  
name,  
may you vanish from where you rest,  
that you might not serve as an instrument  
of death!...

I don't have any use for you  
if the sap you secrete will give my country  
pain,  
I'd sooner burn you or chop you up  
than be a party to treasonous deeds.  
I refuse to use you to spread  
fragrance along the paths of men of evil  
will,  
I'd sooner have you crumble into dust  
than use you to keep my country down.  
I want to use you in the thick of battle  
to hold up the hero's mind for all to  
emulate,  
go, raise up the poor who lie prostrate!  
go, pull down all those who rose through  
greed!

(1930)

Translation: Bienvenido Lumbera

### S.P. Lopez

In response to the polemics of the "coterie of aesthetes" among the Filipino writers in English led by Villa to whom "art is a method of escape," Salvador P. Lopez insisted upon the role of the writer as "tiller of the soil, spade in hand, digging into the roots of things and planting seeds."

*...Despite the fact that events in the odern world have made it increasingly difficult for artists to do their work, there are still those who fondly cling to the delusion that there is an Ivory Tower to which the worshippers of Beauty can retire away from the madding crowd. Of course, there is no such tower; only people who imagine that they dwell in one.*

In praise of Teodoro Kalaw, Filipino writer and editor of the nationalist newspaper *El Renacimiento* which was forced to close down by the American regime, Lopez described Kalaw's work as "growing out of the strong spirit of nationalism and the universal aspiration for independence from America." Following the long tradition of socially-conscious literature in the country, in his essays, in the face of so much worsening social injustice in the cities and the countryside during the Commonwealth Period, he urged Filipino writers to produce

"proletarian literature" rather than "art for art's sake."

### The Philippine Commonwealth Government's Policy: The Role of Language and Literature in Shaping Modernism/s

So in this defining moment, how was the Commonwealth government, whose burden was to prove to the American colonizers that it was "mature" enough to self-govern, to respond to the challenges in this period of "tutelage"?

The deterioration of the economy seemed unstoppable, owing to the social contradictions in a Commonwealth-in-name-but-a-colony-in-fact, and to the forces of global capitalism to which it had been tied as supplier of cheap raw materials to industrialized countries like the US. The agitations were coming from all sides, -- including the politically committed creative writers and journalists -- so the government set out to work on a so-called "social justice program" and other state initiatives meant to address in words if not in deed, the concerns of the Filipino underprivileged.

Manuel L. Quezon, the President under the 10-year transitory Commonwealth government, hoped to hold back the growing tide of social unrest by attempting to address on major fronts some of the socio-economic issues resulting from the country's problems -- including the ones that concerned language and literature.

By executive Order 134, delivered by radiocast in December 1937, Quezon proclaimed that the Filipino national language would be based on Tagalog; in the same executive order, he created the Institute of National Language to be headed by Jayme C. de Veyra, a Visayan and not a Tagalog. Paradoxically, the executive order also indicated that "the adoption of the Philippine National language shall not be understood as anyway affecting the requirement that the instruction in the public schools shall be primarily conducted in the English language." Emphasizing in his speech later during the First Filipino Writers Conference in 1940 that

“The constitution provides that arts and letters be under the patronage of the government,” Quezon seemed adamant in his decision:

*The Americans were denying our ability to run our own government on the ground that we did not have a common language... A common language expresses a common nationality.* (Arguilla 27-28)

The political link between the issue of the granting of Philippine independence by the US and the issue of national language was clear to Quezon; in his mind, it was as if one were a precondition for the other:

*But now that independence is coming, we must realize and admit that we need a common language – a common national language.* (Arguilla 27).

He also instituted the Commonwealth Literary Awards on 25 March 1939 “in response to the efforts of the Philippine Writers League to realize the provision of the constitution...”

Thus, as mandated by the constitution, the Philippine Writers’ League organized the First Filipino Writers Conference in 1940. This conference was attended by the most prominent Filipino writers in Spanish, Tagalog and English of the day.

At one fell swoop, Quezon, in an effort to prove the ability of the Filipinos for self-government had also to prove that the Filipinos could have a common language in which would be expressed a common experience and shared culture through literature. And this literature presumably would be modern and forward-looking, hence the title of the conference was “Modern Literary Objectives.” Thus, towards this end, Quezon hoped to mandate the trajectory of Philippine language and literatures, and along its path, unwittingly, some of the basic problems as well, that continue to haunt the country to this day, unresolved. Understandably, the Philippines Writers’ League-sponsored Commonwealth Literary Contests was “approved by the Office of the President.” Indeed, Quezon himself said:

*All I can say is under my administration, arts and letters will receive due encouragement and I am prepared to ask the National Assembly..... to appropriate funds for this purpose.* (Arguilla 30)

### **The Writers’ Response: Modern, Modernity, Modernism**

The discussions at the “Modern Literary Objectives” conference centered on multiple if contradictory challenges:

- a. The writers in Spanish were looking back. Having lost the audience they used to have until the 1900s, the so-called Golden Age of Hispanic Literature in the Philippines, they were concerned with the Hispanic legacy. In the conference, the speech on Spanish literature was evaluating the influence of Hispanic classics in Tagalog translation like Don Quixote and emphasizing the need to point out the “democratic spirit that pervades the work” as the writers continued to write in the vein of the Hispanic *modernistas*.
- b. The writers in Tagalog, on the other hand, were looking at the present, anxious about the state of literature of Tagalog which, unlike Spanish writing that has lost much readership, had the masses of readers, but did not have the quality of writing they would have desired. Caught between the mass readers of Tagalog novels in commercial magazines and mass audiences of Tagalog movies to which the most popular serialized novels were being adopted, the “maverick” young Tagalog writers were very vocal of their criticism of the older writers whose alleged passivity and complicity had caused the trend towards commercialization of literature to worsen. The young writers were demanding for the raising of aesthetic standards. The Tagalog writers continued to draw from a rich literary tradition even as they began to experiment with the techniques learn from western modernism.



Finally, the writers in English were looking into the future, faced as they were with the question of audience by writing in a new foreign language. Carlos P. Romulo, in his speech at the conference, asked "Will Filipino Literature in English Endure?" (Arguilla 31). The writers in English were divided into ideological lines, arguing between the priority of writing for innovation in craftsmanship to be in-step with the aesthetic trends among their modern or modernist Anglo-American models like Walt Whitman or e.e. cummings, or writing primarily for the economic emancipation of the country and social justice for their countrymen consistent with the writings of Steinbeck or Dos Passos – in English? As the debates around these themes had been going on for some time, by 1940, these debates surprised no one.

### **Apostol**

As generally assumed, "modernity" or the experience of the modern has historically become increasingly associated with the modern "west." However, in the context of the Philippines' multiple colonialism and resulting in a historical sense of oppression, Philippine literature's modernism has been a complex combination of temporalities as well as spacialities characterized by uneven development. Such complexity is a result of the fact that it draws at once from indigenous, folk and popular forms and Asian traditions, as it does from European (mainly Spanish) and Anglo-American influences. A Hispanic example is by Filipino writer in Spanish, Cecilio Apostol.

Part and parcel of the *modernismo* of the writers in Spanish was *nacionalismo*, as illustrated by the works of a major Filipino poet in Spanish, Cecilio Apostol, who had written for the revolutionary anti-Spanish newspaper, *La Independencia*, under General Antonio Luna, and later, for well-known nationalist publications like *The Brotherhood*, *The Union*, *Renaissance* and *Democracy* during the early years of the American regime.

Having read *modernistas* like Miguel de Unamuno, Ruben Dario, Rueda who visited Manila in 1914, Apostol's commitment for both nationalism and modernism is

unmistakable in one of his famous poems, "Al 'Yanklee.'"

### **AL "YANKEE"**

Cecilio Apostol

Siempre que la codicia  
rasga un giron del territorio extraño  
.....  
poetas, vengadores  
de la conciencia universal, acaso  
podreis guardar silencio,  
la honrada voz de la protesta ahogando?  
Ferrari

!Jamás! Cuando la furza  
con la traicion y la injusticia pacta,  
para aplastar los fueros,  
los sacrosantos fueros de una raza;  
Cuando los hijos del infame Judas  
venden la fe jurada;  
cuando al gemido de los pueblos debiles  
contestan con brutales carcajadas;  
Cuando el santo Derecho se trucida  
en el festin de la ambicion humana;  
cuando como los yankees,  
a canonazos brindan una patria;  
No es possible callar: la Patria opresa  
protestara indignada,  
y en el pecho traidor del enemigo  
escondera el punal de su venganza.  
El irredento pueblo  
sucumbira quizas en la demanda,  
mas solo a su cadaver  
se lograra imponer covunda extrana.  
!Yankee! Situ nos vences,  
con el potente empuje de tus armas,  
no viviras dichose, porque te odia  
hasta el ambiente mismo de mi Patria.

!Yankee! Si mis estrofas  
logran sobrevivirme, sus palabras  
vibraran en los siglos venideros  
el odio eterno del eterno paria.  
(1899)

### **TO THE YANKEE**

Cecilio Apostol

As long as greed  
tears a gash in foreign lands  
.....  
poets, avengers  
of the universal conscience

can you be silent,  
drowning the honorable voice of  
protest?

-Ferrari

Never, when might,  
joined with treason and injustice  
to crush the laws and rights  
the sacred rights of a race,  
When the sons of the infamous Judas  
sell the faith that has been sworn,  
when the whimper of weak peoples  
they answer with animal laughter;  
When holy right is bartered  
in the banquet of human ambition,  
as when the Yankees  
toast a nation to the sound of cannon;  
Silence is impossible: the oppressed nation  
shall protest indignantly  
and bury the dagger of vengeance  
in the enemy's breast.  
This unredeemed people  
may perhaps succumb in the struggle,  
but only its corpse  
can be yoked by alien tyranny.  
Yankee! If you defeat us  
with the powerful weight of weapons,  
you will not live happily, because  
you are hated  
even by the air of my native land.  
Yankee! If my verses  
survive me, their words  
will echo in the centuries to come  
the eternal hate of the eternal outcast.

Translation: Nicanor G. Tiongson

As such, Philippine modernism has not always broken with the past nor tried necessarily to be disjunctive of tradition as it has been in the "west." This is illustrated here by the poem "Bangsamoro," a poem by an anonymous author on the issue of the struggle for Muslim independence in the Philippines.

In non-west, specifically, in the Philippine context, modernity and modernism have taken place in uneven, multiple and even contradictory ways. In Philippine literature, modernism is at once constituted by and constitutive of modernity, shaping and re-shaping the experience of the "modern" in a postcolonial society in multiple ways: both as a discourse and counter-discourse of the kind

of modernity that came with colonialisms and capitalism. While being itself problematic, underpinned that it is by the traditions and traditional philosophy of the "west," modernism configures and reconfigures the articulation of the modern. Such was the Philippine experience during the Commonwealth Period.

### **Modernist Writing in Other Philippine Languages**

In the 1930s, in the literature of the different major Philippine languages outside Manila, modern developments took root as well particularly marking the growth of short fiction; yet, in almost equal measure the decade was also witness to the heightening of social consciousness among writers, given the worsening of the economic situation of the country. In quick succession, for example, in Cebuano, Marcel M. Navarra was said to have "inaugurated" the modern short story with plotless narratives; while in Ilonggo, "modernism" became an issue raised by prominent writers like Lorenzo Dilag-Fajardo and Abe S. Gonzalez, who were attempting to depart from the more traditional forms which they deemed formulaic, as well as the experimentation in free verse by in the 1920s by Hiligaynon poets like Salvador Verroya and Isidro Escare Abeto. Meanwhile, writers in the other major languages also began to incorporate new techniques and modern sensibility into their works. However, it should be noted that "traditional" writing, which came out in popular magazines and adapted into movies, as well as the writing following the Spanish heritage, persisted side by side with the influx of new literary developments mainly influenced by Anglo-American trends.

On the university level, beginning in the 1930s, young Filipino writers started to be exposed to literary modernism which highlighted the individuality of the writer and cultivated craft-consciousness, sometimes, as has been observed, at the expense of social consciousness. As expected, the University of the Philippines led the way towards writing that kept up with literary trends outside the country. Founded in the first decade of American occupation, UP had been patterned

after Harvard University in administrative structure and curricular and academic programs. Only two decades of its founding it served as the center of new writing in English.

Thus, it has been said that the arrival of the Americans at the turn of the century was to alter the course of Philippine literature: Particularly during the Commonwealth period, new literary forms were introduced, including free verse in poetry, the modern short story, and the critical essay as the American influence came with the educational system which constituted English as the medium of instruction.

## Conclusion

Recall that through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “modern age” had taken shape in the Philippines with the rise of secularism and a “culture of literacy,” the opening of the Philippine countryside with the growth of commercial agriculture and global trade, and the emergence of nationalism. At the same time, modernity has had to grapple with the facts of its own internal divisions in its search for a more just national collectivity.

“Modern” trends, apart from those which came from or through the United States, found their way into the practice of Spanish and vernacular poets in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Writers who were educated in Spanish accessed modern trends by reading the works of such Spanish and South American modernists as Ruben Dario, Antonio Machado and Federico Garcia Lorca.

Despite showing a mistrust of American colonizers, many memoirs in Spanish, written early during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were also influenced by Anglo-American modernist writings. In the decades following the Pacific War, the presence of modern adaptations of works produced in the Spanish period further maintains the Spanish tradition.

Spanish, spoken and read only by 10% of the population at the close of the Spanish rule, quickly declined, however, though the Spanish cultural legacy remained an important constituent of Filipino culture.

The installation of English as a medium of instruction in Philippine schools gravely undermined Spanish. By the close of the 1930s, English writing had overtaken Spanish writing, the language of the new colonialists, having won out as the more prestigious medium for young writers. But while writing in Spanish is scant today, the triple legacies from the Spanish colonial period – didacticism, romanticism, and social realism are vigorously alive, with an admixture of Western modernism.

English was introduced as an “official language” and it grew in prestige as the Americanization of the Philippine society advanced. Filipinos were connected into a world in which American and, through American mediation, Western literary and intellectual traditions began to build cultural, literary and linguistic inroads. With the decline of Spanish, English became an important medium specifically for the essay, the adopted language of Filipino intellectuals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in fact, since the 1970s, there have been frantic efforts to “intellectualize” the Tagalog language as well by promoting its use in academic discourse.

Given the apparent contradictions in Philippine society, the writers repeatedly debated the issues of “tradition” and “modernity” as illustrated in the discussions that engaged the Tagalog writers’ groups *Ilaw at Panitik* and *Aklatang Bayan*. This debate would continue to the present, in line with the debates on the Philippine literary canon and the issue of national language.

Literary modernity has been referred to alternatively as an attitude toward the literary world which assumes a transformative dynamic between writer and literature, or a structure involving a complex of state institutions that mandate cultural and linguistic directions. If so, then it can be said on the basis of the foregoing exposition that in the Philippines, literary modernity consists of multiple, complex and contradictory attitudes or structures. Filipino “modernism” and “modernity,” as the terms are generally understood in the West, may seem at once strange and familiar. Owing perhaps ultimately to the law of uneven development

as much in economics as in politics in the history of relations between core and peripheral countries, imperial centers and colonial peripheries, the dynamics of “modernism” and “modernity” in the literature of the non-West like the Philippines has involved an amalgam of historical impulses that amount to something irreducibly different from the Western models.

As sensibility, there is the intersection of the liberal individualism symptomatic of the aestheticism exemplified by Jose Garcia Villa; but there is, too, the collective sense of self-determination in the nationalism of Banigno Ramos, and finally, there is the impulse for solidarity in the Socialist internationalism of Salvador P. Lopez, partisan and committed to the Filipino working class. As craftsmanship, there is the apparent shift from the medieval metrical romances in drama and the novel, that had dominated literature under the Spanish colonial era to the “realism” and experimentation of the modern genres, or the shift from the conventions of rhyme and meter of *Balagtasismo* to the free verse of Alejandro G. Abadilla. Between those, there are as many other shades of “modernism” in literature as one might care to name.

Still, there is, too, the continuing nagging quest for the national language, an issue that certainly has always been implicated in literature – what has been referred to as “the problem of language” in the Philippines. Not merely a vehicle of communicating power, especially in the Philippines’ multi-linguistic setting, language is itself associative of power of class, of culture. For better or for worst, Tagalog has been deemed by partisans to be the most developed of the Philippine languages, and hence the most modern; ergo, it deserves to be the basis of the national language, following the logic of Quezon more than seventy years go. The “language issue,” rooted in the country’s colonial history, remains “unresolved” to this day, indeed. Meanwhile, in languages as in literatures, in the Philippines, values have been assigned for literatures and languages to be either pampanitikan (high-brow) or pambakya (low-brow), or of having pulitika but not estetika, further complicating the

crisscrossing of modernities in the Philippines.

In the meantime, beyond Spanish, English or Tagalog or any other major Philippine languages, literatures coming from the farther “margins” of modernism/modernity who had not been represented in the First Filipino Writers Conference in 1940, simply continued to flourish all by themselves. In the face of the Muslim Filipinos’ quest for a rectification of the mistaken annexation of their homeland into the Philippine Republic by the United States during the Commonwealth Period, President Quezon’s call for the landless and the jobless mainly Christian Filipinos from Luzon and the Visayas to occupy Mindanao, “the land of promise,” only worsened the condition of internal colonization of the Filipinos from the south by the north. Although the Muslim Filipinos are not themselves the “first Nations” in Mindanao, as non-Muslim indigenous peoples of Mindanao had historic rights of ancestral domain, the Commonwealth Period, turned the land of promise into the land of strife, ever aggravating their condition of marginalization.

### Modernism: Making New

As in the rich oral literatures of Muslim Filipinos, in the poem “Bangsamoro,” written by an anonymous author, the historical cry for freedom and desire for Moroland, remains the battlecry. In the poem, “Bangsamoro” is at once a trope for the building of a modern Philippines in which majority and minority cultures co-exist, a figure for modernity in which progress is achieved by a people united under a single flag, and modernist “making new” as it symbolizes the final break from an unjust past.

#### *Bangsamoro*

Bangsamoro, gedam imaman kanu  
 Ka intindig su agama Islam  
 So kapanlalim sa lekitanu  
 nu taw a lumalapu  
 wageb saguna na imbunwa tanu  
 Bangsamoro, a baninindig  
 kanu inged

lila su ngiwa indi lugo  
Mamagayon, mamagisa-isa  
apas tanu su kandaludaya  
Palaw ataw didsan  
Pawas kadatalan  
su kandaludaya  
ataw pakuburan

### People of Bangsamoro

People of Bangsamoro, awake and make up  
your

Mind  
Stand for our faith  
The oppression they did to us  
The immigrants  
now is the time to fight them  
People of Bangsamoro who  
fight for our Cause  
offer your body and blood  
Cooperate, unite  
aim for freedom in the mountains  
even how many our enemies are  
Freedom  
or Martryrdom.

Translation by Zamzamin Ampatuan and  
Nikita Lauban

Indeed, caught between these crisscrossing lines in literature are the intersecting issues of sensibility, craftsmanship and languages in the Philippines, of historical divisions of class, of ethnicity. Modernism and modernity at once involve a break with the past, an affirmation of the power of the individual to create and the power of a people to determine their collective destiny, and the faith in the capacity of literature to make all that happen. But having remained an “ongoing project” in the literary scene of so many places for so long, modernism might also perhaps be a symptom of a global modernity in crisis.

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