



Fabulists and Chroniclers

Christina Pantoja Hidalgo

Reviewed by C. S. SCHREINER

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Fabulists and Chroniclers provides an insider's view of literary culture in the Philippines. It is an account replete with names, historical allusions, and literary criticism. Although the tone of *Fabulists and Chroniclers* is personal, hence highly readable, its content is scholarly from beginning to end, including numerous citations. For a reader new to Filipino literary culture, the sheer quantity of names and titles is challenging to absorb. The author, Dr. Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, is a highly suitable guide to literary developments in the Philippines. As of publication date in 2008, she was teaching creative writing and comparative literature at the University of the Philippines-Manila, while also serving as Vice President for Public Affairs at the same institution. Her own publications, more than a dozen books, include both literary criticism and imaginative writing, i.e., fiction, poetry, and travel writing. Hidalgo's book preceding the one under review is *Over a Cup of Tea: Conversations on the Literary Narratives of Filipino Women* (2007). She also published *Creative Nonfiction: A Manual for Filipino Writers* (2003). Both are likewise published by the University Press of the Philippines.

Hidalgo's topic is compelling, encompassing as it does the emergent literary culture of a developing country. Writers and teachers on Guam can learn much from this book, which shows that an institutional hub and infrastructure are indispensable to the growth of a literary tradition. One can hardly write in a vacuum. The infrastructure includes but is not limited to academic programs in creative writing, literary prizes, grants, publishing houses, conferences, and journals, all of which are present to some extent in the Philippines today according to the author. Hidalgo demonstrates a keen awareness of these concrete necessities. She also examines the quality and specific influence of connections between academia and creative writing. The fact that Hidalgo's book is "dedicated to my dear friends in the UP Institute of Creative Writing" underscores the inner relation between her own literary success and the support (moral, financial, communal) she has enjoyed at the University of the Philippines. The University Press of the Philippines, with which she has had an editorial role, continues to publish many creative and scholarly manuscripts. (Its website can be accessed at <http://uppress.com.ph/index.html>.)

The issue of the institutional life of creative writing has been a controversial one in the United States, with critics arguing that the proliferation of workshops on college campuses has

homogenized the writing of program participants as a “workshop style.” According to Hidalgo this is not an issue for Filipino writers, who learn not only writing skills but critical theories that conceptualize their work. She remarks: “Far from serving as a deterrent to adventurousness, academe has been an impetus for literary experiments” (22). Nor has academia isolated Filipino writers from the wider society. The reasons for this state of affairs are various. Many of the venues that publish literary writing are not academic presses. Independent publishing houses include Milflores, Bookmark, New Day, Cacho Hermanos, Summit, High Chair, Adarna, and Lampara (44). Furthermore, many of the Filipino writers, although affiliated with universities, are by no means full-time faculty members. Hidalgo describes the avocations of writers as follows:

Most writers who teach creative writing or literature are not just teachers. Some hold seminars in grammar or business correspondence for corporations. Some write columns for newspapers...Some write speeches for politicians. Some edit other people's work. Others write commissioned biographies or company histories. Still others write film scripts or teleplays. There are even teachers who act in the films or teleplays, or direct them. And, of course, there are teachers who leave the campus at the end of the day, and become real estate agents or caterers. In short, in the Philippines, as in other developing countries, the notion of academe as ivory tower is a myth. (45)

Such a mosaic of employments for writers, common in many countries today, is a reality of which student writers need to be apprised as early as possible. It is painfully naive of students in writing class, but not untypical, to seek the celebrity status associated with the likes of Stephen King by aiming immediately for a blockbuster. (Hence in my own creative writing classes I repeat the refrain uttered by Heidegger to his philosophy students: “Submit small change, please, not big bills!”) Success is likely to come later than earlier; in the meantime, one must earn a living while reading and writing as much as possible in one's spare time. It has been said that only one out of a hundred writers support themselves by *writing*.

It is noteworthy that the main focus of Cristina Hidalgo's study is Filipino writing done in English. Her own prolific output, both scholarly and creative, has mostly been in English, as has that of many of her accomplished peers in the Philippines. For these writers, the use of English is not a mark of subservience to colonialism or American hegemony. They see their bilingualism as empowering and pragmatic. While the colonial past is irreducible as historical fact and not to be denied, the present and future offer an opportunity for an imaginative appropriation of English that is inflected with hybrid stylizations that are specific to Filipino experience and culture. The literary Filipinos colonize English instead of being colonized by it. Hidalgo cites Gémino H. Abad to reinforce this crucial point: “Our concern now is what we have made of English; at first indeed we wrote in English, and freely borrowed and adopted, and then, we wrought from English, and forged (in its double sense) ourselves and our own scene where we worked out our own destiny” (47). She also cites the following comment by the fictionist Jose Y. Dalisay: “we are witnessing the continuing de-Americanization of English, its appropriation by Filipino writers for Filipino subjects and purposes” (5). Future styles are anyone's guess; as Hidalgo

points out, blogging and other electronic discourses might further inflect Standard English and bring literature closer to the languages of everyday life in “different registers of English, Taglish, Filipino, Cebuano, Iluko....” (33).

In this regard, one of the consistent themes of *Fabulists and Chroniclers* is the stylistic diversity of writing being published in the Philippines. The styles range, Hidalgo observes,

... from the social realism of Menchu Sarmiento to the lyrical fantasies of Clinton Palanca; from the offhand humor of April Yap to the raw violence of Paolo Manalo; from the quiet little stories of Katrina Tuvera and Celeste Flores to the cerebral games played by Luis Katigbak and the lurid, gothic tales of Karl de Mesa; from the minimalist tales of Tara F.T. Sering to the complex ruminations of Vincente Groyon. Romina Gonzalez produces both conventional, “well-made” stories and surreal experimental ones. Lakambini Sito’s realist stories are as fine as her futurist tales. Socorro Villanueva and Angelo Lacuesta write in many different voices. These writers recognize no taboos, exploring incest and child abuse, abortion and euthanasia, gender and ethnicity, environmental depredation and globalization, but also, of course, the old themes of childhood, love and death, courage and betrayal, guilt and expiation. (21)

The first chapter of *Fabulists and Chroniclers*, “Fiction as Response to History,” retraces the modern evolution of literary forms in the Philippines, concretely depicting the efforts of individual writers to establish unique identities and styles while expressing what Hidalgo describes as their “dominant preoccupation, Filipino-ness.” The generations of writers that followed in the giant steps of José Rizal’s masterpieces, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, have not fully extricated themselves from his shadow, but have expressed explicit awareness of the problem, famously called the “anxiety of influence” by the Yale Critic, Harold Bloom. It is indicative of the scope of this problem that Filipino writers only published about eleven novels in English from 1941 to 1962, according to a study cited by the author. Indeed, writers in the Philippines adopted the modest sobriquets “fictionists” and “fabulists” to describe themselves, saving the majestic term “novelist” for the father of Filipino literature and national hero, José Rizal. It has been argued that the *Noli*, as Rizal’s most famous novel is nicknamed, was the first work of literature written by a Filipino to show the Filipino people that they are a distinct nation state whose hybrid population forms a genuine community. Benedict Anderson, a scholar at Cornell University, writes in his book *Imagined Communities* (1983) that the *Noli* awakened a national identity among the Filipino population. Rizal’s martyrdom, before a firing squad in 1896, ensured that his contribution would not be forgotten.

Given the above-mentioned anxiety of influence associated with José Rizal, the pursuit of the Great Filipino Novel would seem to be an endless labyrinth of self-effacement and questioning; yet according to Cristina Hidalgo, a case can be made for the novel as being “the most interesting genre in Philippine literature in English.” In the modern era were published chronicle-like manuscripts that engage meaningfully with history, seeking to portray if not preserve cultural forms, as well as “fabulist” works that are both speculative and fantastic. But even the latter have realistic elements and in general are well-crafted. Hidalgo says that overall,

these post-war (or modern as opposed to contemporary) Filipino novelists merge realism with romanticism in highly individualistic ways. Among the post-war Filipino novelists, she singles out six as most distinguished, listed as follows with their most characteristic novel: N.V.M. Gonzalez, *The Bamboo Dancers* (1959); Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961); Kerima Polotan, *The Hand of the Enemy* (1962); Edith Tiempo, *A Blade of Fern* (1979); F. Sionil Jose, *Mass* (1979); and Bienvenido Santos, *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor* (1983).

In the second chapter, "Fabulists and Chroniclers," which shares its title with the book, the author identifies and interprets the four "most interesting" contemporary Filipino novels written in English. These are as follows: *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* by Alfred A. Yuson (1988); *The Firewalkers* by Erwin Castillo (2003); *Sky Over Dimas* by Vicente Garcia Groyon (2003); and *Banyaga: A Song of War* by Charlson Ong (2006). Hidalgo says that all of them are characterized by tremendous creative energy. Fantasy plays a fundamental role in three of the novels, which are also sexually explicit, while the fourth novel is frankly surreal. In other words, these contemporary novels break with the type of realism that pervades earlier literary forms governed by ethical norms. The contemporary novels mix "hilarity and ribaldry" (59) and focus on taboo topics--such as bodily functions--that were judged inappropriate in post-war novels. All of these novels, she asserts, even those that are ostensibly realist, "contain scenes more commonly found in melodrama than in the realist novel: flamboyance, the gothic detail, the extravagant gesture" (59).

The third chapter of *Fabulists and Chroniclers*, "New Tales from Old," addresses a particular development within the heterogeneous category that Hidalgo terms "speculative fiction." Speculative fiction is a genre particularly attractive, Hidalgo says, to the younger generation, and encompasses "science fiction, fantasy, horror fiction, gothic fiction, supernatural fiction, futurist fiction, slipstream, surfiction, and magical realism" (110). One can include the *Harry Potter* series and *Lord of the Rings* as recent examples of this popular category whose audience is by no means limited to young people. The author's own interest in speculative fiction focuses on feminist "modern wonder tales" that contain elements of myth and fantasy. Hidalgo argues that these literary fairy tales, traditionally associated with children's books, have not received adequate attention by scholars as either modern or postmodern narratives that recycle folklore and fantasy in particular ways that are enabling for women. Among the Filipino fictions that are noteworthy here is Gilda Cordero-Fernando's *Bad Kings* (2006). Hidalgo also explicates a number of short stories including Maria Elena Paterno's "A Song in the Wind" (1992); Rosario Lucero's "Doreen's Story" (2003); Virginia Villanueva's "Sea Change" (2005); and Nikki Alfar's "Bearing Fruit" (2007). Some of these works exceed the style and scope of the folktale and bring to mind magic realism or "marvelous realism" (126).

The last chapter of Hidalgo's book is titled "Literary Memoir as Social Chronicle." It addresses the increasingly important role that literary non-fiction plays in the Philippines, as it does elsewhere. Hidalgo's doctoral dissertation in 1994 was on women's autobiography in the Philippines, and she has carved out this niche as a focus of her research and in her own creative writing, which includes travel writing. Creative non-fiction has struggled for recognition among traditionalists, but received a strong impetus from the success of the New Journalism. Many strong Filipino writers emerged from the 1970s having published in newspapers such as the

Philippines Free Press and *Manila Times*, including Nick Joaquin and Kerima Polotan. According to Hidalgo, Maria Paz Mendez published the first full-length Filipino memoir in English, *A String of Pearls* (1993). A few notable works in this genre have appeared since then, such as Barbara Gonzalez's *We're History* (1998) and *The Last Full Moon: Lessons on My Life*, by Gilda Cordero-Fernando (2005). But the genre has room to grow and represents a serious opportunity for feminist self-expression about Filipino issues ranging from war experiences to balancing one's career with family obligations.

Fabulists and Chroniclers is a testament to the positive outcomes that result from serious efforts among writers in academia and outside to establish a literary community and heritage. This reviewer is inspired to read recent Filipino fictions. To be sure, unfamiliarity with many of the titles cited in Hidalgo's study precludes an assessment of their relative merits and standing in the "world republic of letters" as described by Pascale Casanova (2004). Also, the good news about the growth of the Filipino writing scene reported by Hidalgo is tempered by the stark reality of a decline in advanced literacy, the kind that appreciates literature; she observes that in the Philippines "the level of proficiency in the English language continues to deteriorate." It is telling that the "average print run" of Filipino books in English is less than one thousand (19). Declines in advanced literacy are not limited to the Philippines and are reported in developed as well as developing countries. Be this as it may, for those of us on Guam seeking to encourage the growth of a writing community, the results achieved by our Asian-Pacific neighbor represent a bracing challenge to our artistic determination and powers of organization.

References

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Dr. Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo is Vice President for Public Affairs, and Professor of English, comparative literature, and creative writing at the University of the Philippines. Quezon City, Philippines.