

## ALLEGORY AND ARCHIPELAGO: JESÚS BALMORI'S *LOS PÁJAROS DE FUEGO* AND THE GLOBAL VANTAGES OF FILIPINO LITERATURE IN SPANISH

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### Abstract

The trajectory of modern globalization is incomprehensible without an attempt to understand the Philippines. This essay considers a Filipino novel written in Spanish during World War II, *Los pájaros de fuego* [*The Birds of Fire*] by Jesús Balmori, as a landmark of world literature by virtue of its composition in the tongue of an old European empire, under the duress of an East Asian empire, and during the colonization of a North American empire. Although the novel focuses on the elite Spanish-speaking class of the mid-20th-century Philippines, its allegorical processings of a globalized conflict raise questions of broad theoretical import to many academic disciplines. *The Birds of Fire*, despite its obscurity and that of the tradition of which it is part, reveals Filipino literature in Spanish to be a key to rendering a fuller account of the contemporary world and the imperial histories that pervade it.

### Keywords

hispanophone Asian novel, World War II literature

### About the author

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### Editor's note

In an essay in the next issue of *Kritika Kultura*, Adam Lifshy will argue that *Fiame* [*Trust in Me*] by Mariano L. De la Rosa, another Filipino novel in Spanish written during and about World War II, offers the possibility of rethinking the definitions of Filipino American literature so as to include texts written from the archipelago and in the old imperial language.

The trajectory of modern globalization is incomprehensible without an attempt to understand the Philippines. It was in the Philippines that, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what was once the largest empire in the world, that of Spain, finally was forced to withdraw from the most distant of its colonies. It was the victor of Spain, the United States, who in taking over the

Philippines established its planetary reach that was to mark the entirety of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is from the Philippines that, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, emerges a labor force of staggering size that scatters around the world as the human infrastructure of the latest phase of international capitalism. And it is the Philippines where the most globalized conflict of them all, World War II, was drenched in blood by the last major land battle between Japanese and American forces. The carnage climaxed in Intramuros, the old walled town of Manila built by Spanish colonialists and, until that moment of its obliteration, the traditional home of the largest Spanish-speaking community in Asia. Grasping the global dimensions of these phenomena is impossible without considering the art produced by locals who witnessed them. Modernity is narrated not only by those who wrest power on foreign shores. And a Filipino novel written in Spanish during World War II, *Los pájaros de fuego* [*The Birds of Fire*] by Jesús Balmori, is therefore a critical component to any broad reckoning with the world in welter that is ours. By virtue of its composition in the tongue of an old European empire, under the duress of an East Asian empire, and during the colonization of a North American empire, this novel is inherently a landmark of world literature. Yet the tradition that it ends, a diverse body of literature produced in Spanish under United States rule from its colonization of the Philippines in 1898 to the independence of the archipelago in 1946, is known by few people even to exist.

Filipino literature in Spanish is almost exclusively associated with a single figure, José Rizal, a man of letters who was executed by Spain in 1896 as a supposed subversive. Nevertheless, and despite the imposition after 1898 of English as a common language in the archipelago, Filipinos who wrote in Spanish continued to produce compelling prose and poetry for many decades. Communities of readers throughout the islands followed their work, but the significance of a text such as *The Birds of Fire* correlates inversely to its own lack of an audience. Balmori finished the novel in 1945 but did not publish it. The manuscript was purchased by the Filipino government of the time and effectively disappeared. Over the decades, most of the few scholars who knew of it assumed it had been lost forever. There is proof, however, that one individual, Florentino Hornedo, did read it in that timespan, and likelihood that another, Estanislao Alinea, did as well.<sup>1</sup> That is it. Lourdes Castrillo Brillantes, writing in 2006, observed that “According to Pilar Mariño, former professor of the University of the Philippines and translator of Balmori’s short stories, his last novel is in the possession of the Philippine Government and, until 1987, was known to be still unpublished” (69). In other words, all Brillantes could do as late as 2006 was point to a reference some two decades earlier to the unpublished status of *The Birds of Fire*.

A measure of the current state of scholarship on Filipino literature in Spanish is that a number of the texts whose titles but not contents are known are not lost at all but available in well-known places to anyone who might look for them. A microfilm of the typed manuscript of *The Birds of Fire* survived for years, perhaps decades, in the library of the Ateneo de Manila University, yet

not until recently did researchers independently find it.<sup>2</sup> It is prefaced by a note apparently from Hornedo (it is initialized by “F.H.H.”) dated 1979.<sup>3</sup> One of the rediscoveries led to the publication of the novel in 2010 by the Cervantes Institute, a cultural organization of the government of Spain. This edition by Isaac Donoso Jiménez is the first to see print and is meant primarily for archival existence, not retail. It is a philological edition in the sense that it offers footnotes that elucidate various historical and cultural references by Balmori and explains the differences between the Ateneo microfilm and the manuscript bought by the Filipino government.<sup>4</sup> It also includes helpful introductory prose on the author and a large bibliography of his writings.

Due to the invisibility of *The Birds of Fire* since the War but the prominence of its author, scholars in the interim had to describe a text of which they had only heard. Balmori had been a leading literary figure for four decades and the novel was his last major work, so simply ignoring it was not an appealing option. Without a manuscript in hand, the critical attempts could not help but be lean. Brillantes writes that “His third and last novel, *Pájaros de Fuego*, shows its principal character accepting the existence of God, society, and its limitations, and displays fervent patriotism” (69). This single sentence summary is vague to the extent that it does not mention World War II, the context of the plot. The wording seems to be a paraphrase of the introduction to the bilingual 1987 anthology *Cuentos de Balmori* [*Short Stories by Balmori*] edited by Mariño.<sup>5</sup> Alinea, writing in 1964, provides a more detailed description of the novel, which he terms “esta obra que es la más lograda en prosa de Jesús Balmori” [“this work that is the most accomplished in prose of Jesús Balmori”] (97). Hornedo is rather less sanguine, saying that the *The Birds of Fire* “promises by its title more than it delivers” (“Notes” 412). Donoso Jiménez, editor of the published version of the novel, states in contrast that *The Birds of Fire* is “una obra cardinal” [“a cardinal work”] (I). These few sources offer just about the only commentary in existence on the text.

As for Balmori himself, he was born in 1886 and became one of the most renowned of the Filipino literati to come of age under United States rule. His publications in a range of genres match chronologically the entire span of the North American regime. Due to his early stardom, much is known about his biography and many of his texts survive. In 1904, when still a teenager, he published *Rimas malayas* [*Malay Rhymes*], his first book of poems. In 1908, barely into his twenties, he won a high-profile poetic competition and, according to Donoso Jiménez, “A partir de este momento Jesús Balmori pasará a ser figura principal de la creación poética filipina” [“beginning at this moment Jesús Balmori would become a principal figure of Filipino poetic creation”] (xvii). In 1910, he published *Bancarrota de almas* [*Bankruptcy of Souls*], which is generally accepted to be the first Filipino novel in Spanish since Rizal’s *El filibusterismo* [*Subversion*] of nearly two decades earlier.<sup>6</sup> In 1924, he engaged in a series of public verse competitions with another esteemed poet, Manuel Bernabé, which were denominated as jousts and which are considered a high point of a

phenomenon referred to by various scholars as the Golden Age of Filipino Literature in Spanish. In 1926, Balmori received the Zóbel prize for the best Filipino literature in Spanish of the year. And in 1940, he won a national award for what is often considered his greatest work, *Mi casa de nipa* [*My House of Nipa*], a thick volume of poetry.<sup>7</sup> He died in 1948, just two years after the Philippines gained independence from the United States and three years after finishing *The Birds of Fire*, his early promise having been borne out at least in terms of prolific output and widespread recognition.

Aesthetically, *The Birds of Fire* is a melodrama whose Romantic pretensions struggle to keep pace with a reality more savage than anything a belletristic poet like Balmori was likely to imagine on his own. The plot centers around the Robles, a wealthy Filipino extended family headed by Don Lino, who reveres Japanese culture, and his pragmatic brother Don Ramón, who figures out before anyone else the threat to the Philippines of the expanding empire of Hirohito. Don Lino has two young adult children, Natalia, who plays the role of innocent Filipina virgin that is apparently obligatory in every Filipino story written in Spanish, and Fernando, an astute and patriotic lad who commits himself early to the national defense. Natalia has a boyfriend, Sandoval, a cosmopolitan but worthless doctor (he has degrees from universities in Tokyo, Berlin, and Vienna but no patients) and gold digger and fop who represents a non-hereditary and rising professional class that is styled in the novel as so much nouveau riche rubbish. (Balmori is very much an elitist, but he prefers the traditional aristocracy of Spanish-era descent rather than the modern parvenus who have ascended during the United States occupation). Natalia also has an Italian suitor, the irascible and pretentious Bruno Anselmi, who teaches her to sing and play the piano and claims that Mussolini is his uncle in order to impress the Robles.

Fernando, meanwhile, has a fiancée, Marta, who is as pure as Natalia but stands for the eternal goodness of Filipinas of indigenous and rural stock. She represents phenotypically and therefore metaphorically the peasantry even though her family is wealthy and landed too. A couple of Japanese gardeners who are actually secret agents with symbolic bents (they plant chrysanthemums, the representative flower of imperial Japan, over Don Lino's lands in the opening scene) plus the German physician Fritz Von Kauffman, a friend of the Italian rogue Anselmi, round out the cast of avatars on the Axis side. There is also a priest who counsels against armed rebellion by lower-class Filipinos against the Japanese occupiers—the explicit reason is that killing is morally wrong; the obvious actual reason is the assumed horror of serf uprising—and a foreman of the Robles estate who, after the Japanese atrocities have begun, leads the rest of the servants to the mountains to form guerilla units.

The pre-War history of the archipelago provides a context for this cast but is rarely spotlighted. The overarching political story of the post-1898 Philippines is that the United States,

after defeating both Spain and indigenous revolutionaries, imposed English and various other regimes while running the colony directly and via a proxy alliance with an array of local elites. Factions within the elites increasingly competed to bring home an independence deal from Washington and the winner was led by Manuel Quezon, who claimed triumph after the passage in the United States Congress of the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934. This legislation established a transitional entity known as the Commonwealth of the Philippines that would come into existence in 1935 and terminate with the full independence of the archipelago in 1946. Quezon duly won the presidential elections of 1935. It was in honor of the fifth anniversary of the Commonwealth in 1940, still then run by Quezon, that a national literary competition was held and won by Balmori with his capstone book of verse, *My House of Nipa* (Alinea 87).

The gradualism of the transitional period toward independence evaporated in early December 1941 when, just after bombing Pearl Harbor, Japanese pilots attacked the United States's "biggest air armada anywhere overseas," the fleet commanded in the Philippines by Douglas MacArthur (Karnow 288). The Japanese assault on the archipelago that began fully with the land invasion of Manila in January 1942 proved to be a particularly brutal episode in the history of humanity. Lowlights included the Bataan Death March. Amid the devastations, Japan pushed the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which was a euphemism for its imperial holdings that included Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria. In 1943, co-opting the always pliable Filipino elite and trying to hoodwink the general population, Japan established the allegedly independent Philippine Republic, a puppet government. In 1945, in order to fulfill his prediction of "I shall return," MacArthur unnecessarily committed his troops to fighting the Japanese in the Philippines rather than elsewhere. This led directly to the deaths of approximately one million Filipinos, the aforementioned obliteration of Intramuros, and, in the final Japanese retreat, an apocalypse described by Stanley Karnow as follows: "Trapped in the chaos, the Japanese embarked on an orgy of atrocities matched only by the pillage of Nanking in 1937. They impaled babies on bayonets, raped women, beheaded men and mutilated the corpses. Setting houses ablaze, they shot the fleeing inhabitants, and started fires in hospitals after strapping patients to their beds" (321). All these historical phenomena—Quezon and the Commonwealth, Bataan, the occupation of Manila, the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, the Philippine Republic, the horrific finale—are critical to understanding the novel of Balmori even though the author generally highlights instead the family saga of the Robles. The discrepancy between the macroscopic background and the melodramatic foreground is therefore key to any substantive analysis of the text.

Early in *The Birds of Fire*, Fernando is driving to visit his beloved Marta but is held up by "una gran parada militar en honor al Aniversario del Commonwealth ... Marchaban nuestros soldados confundidos con los de América" ["a great military parade in honor of the Anniversary of

the Commonwealth ... Our soldiers marched mixed in with those of America"] (25-26). This scene establishes a specific pre-War chronological and political frame for *The Birds of Fire* that is otherwise left implicit. Fernando follows the parade to Luneta Park, symbolic center of the nation as the site of the execution of Rizal, where "Estaba hablando el Presidente ... decía que en cualquier instante, Filipinas estaría dispuesta a luchar junto a América en defensa de las Democracias y a morir junto a América, si hacía falta dar la vida, por la libertad del mundo. Fernando pensó entonces que el tío Ramón no había hablado por hablar" ["The President was speaking ... he said that in any moment, the Philippines would be ready to fight next to America in defense of the Democracies and to die next to America, if it were necessary to lose life, for the liberty of the world. Fernando realized then that Uncle Ramón had not been talking just to talk"] (26). The unnamed President is Quezon and the allied Filipino and United States troops will, in fact, die together when the War does arrive. Armed hostilities, however, only commence about two-thirds of the way through the novel, a belated moment that suggests that the real concern of Balmori is not so much the War as a certain elite class whose way of life the War alters irrevocably. The aristocracy is nearly helpless when Japan invades the Philippines as a gleeful rapist: "La deseaba con el furor sensual del sátiro a la ninfa hermosa ... Soñaba en devorarla, en embriagarse y festejarse con su sangre rica y generosa, como el lobo a la gacela" ["He desired her with the sensual fury of the satyr falling upon the beautiful nymph ... He dreamed of devouring her, getting drunk and partying with her rich and generous blood, like the wolf falling upon the gazelle"] (144).

Amid the ravages and ruinations that follow, one by one the cast of the novel is destroyed. Fernando, the most active participant in the resistance effort, is wounded while fighting in Bataan, barely survives a concentration camp, ends up leading irregulars in the countryside, recants such work at the advice of the priest, and ultimately dies by a relatively random Japanese bullet. At the family mansion, his sister Natalia is raped by Japanese soldiers as her horrified father, the nipponophile Don Lino, listens (174-75). He dies afterward out of grief and shock, never having understood anything at all about the giant contending forces of the War or the class and social tensions of Filipino society. Sandoval, her boyfriend, is taken prisoner and later perishes when the hospital where he works is bombed by the Japanese (153, 189). Anselmi the Italian and Von Kauffman the German are slain by their allegorical allies in the sadistic final retreat of the Japanese from Manila.

Throughout these episodes there are fleeting allusions to wartime entities such as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the puppet Philippine Republic. Yet these are often not named directly, much as Quezon is not when the President of the Commonwealth speaks. The effect is to underline the allegorical rather than realist aesthetics and logics of the novel. *The Birds of Fire*, whose title alludes to Japanese bombers, thus ends with the appearance in Filipino skies of other symbolic birds:



Un día, después de muchos tristes días, las águilas de América volaron con sus alas el resplandor del sol ... ¡Salve, América, buena, grande y ponderosa ... ¿En dónde estaban, en tanto, los pájaros de fuego? ¿En qué entraña de qué abismos se habían refugiado despavoridos el cinismo, la osadía y la mentira enormes del Japón? Pasó la noche, pasaron la traición y el crimen. Esta era América, señores japoneses. Las águilas volvían a su nido. (203)<sup>8</sup>

[One day, after many sad days, the eagles of America flew with their wings by the brightness of the sun ... Salutations, America, good, great and powerful!... Where were, meanwhile, the birds of fire? In which hiding places of which abysses had the cynicism, impudence and enormous lies of Japan taken terrified refuge? The night was over, treason and crime were over. This was America, Masters Japanese. The eagles were returning to their nest.]

The novel, which begins with a Commonwealth anniversary parade in which United States and Filipino troops march as one, thereby finishes with a reassertion of United States power. Balmori then adds as a coda an entirely unexpected ode to Christopher Columbus. The only main characters still alive by this point are the childless Don Ramón and the solitary Marta. The novel thus ends as a tragedy.

Although Balmori had been a prolific author for forty years before writing *The Birds of Fire*, that experience proved to be of limited help when confronting the fact that, in writing about the War, he was acting as a witness as much as a novelist. As such, his chief challenge was how to tell the national story through invented characters whose fates were immaterial per se, in part because their travails were by definition insignificant (they are, after all, invented) and in part because individual stories were likely to seem ultimately irrelevant given the sheer vastness of the forces contending the War. Rhetorical strategies of any traditional kind were sure to be incommensurate to the acute realities of the 1940s in the Philippines, particularly the hyperstylized discourses with which Balmori had built a poetic career. How to depict the documentable macro of the War via the imaginary micro? How to bear witness to social tragedy on a colossal scale while entertaining the private reader anticipated of any novel? Given the various liquidations of Filipinos and Filipino contexts in the War, Balmori could not have hoped for any immediate audience for his novel, but he still faced the task of representing the possibly unrepresentable. Moreover, he wrote under immense duress, and this too surely conditioned his decisions in diverse ways. Had his manuscript been found by Japanese soldiers, torture and execution surely would have befallen him.<sup>9</sup>

When enemy soldiers toss infants up in the air and bayonet them with glee on the way down, what is the representational duty of the novelist? This is not a hypothetical question: such horrors occurred repeatedly. What is the appropriate strategy to account, via fiction, for such sickening truths not yet historical but contemporary? Is the story best told via recreations of the giant figures astride the stage, MacArthur and Quezon and Hirohito? This would be a large canvas approach, but then the problem for a Filipino author would be that these world-historical figures who directed events in the Philippines spent most or all of the War far outside the archipelago. Should the story pattern itself on the particular wartime experiences of a small set of everyday people in Manila? This would be a miniaturist approach, but then the problem would be that the very real presence in the Philippines of a hyperbolic context would be largely elided. An abstract or experimental approach apparently was not an option, such as recourse to avant-garde aesthetics based on any of the radical artistic philosophies that had come out of interwar Europe. Balmori does not seem to have assimilated those isms. Instead, he chose a strategy that had been present in Filipino literature in Spanish since Rizal, indeed since the novel *Ninay* by his predecessor Pedro Paterno: the creation of an extended family melodrama that would be allegorical to the national issues at hand. The micro plots of loves lost and gained, of the vicissitudes of personal finances and private powers, of the class and ethnic standings of the characters who die or survive, of those characters who remain subjective agents after the last page is turned, would stand synecdochically for the macro plot of national allies lost and gained, of the ups and downs in economic and sovereign strength, of the pre-existing social structures that became eradicated or altered, and of the potential social roles for those who still breathe by the end.

Notably, *The Birds of Fire* foregrounds the older generation of Robles, Don Lino and Don Ramón, as much as or more than their would-be heirs Natalia and Fernando and their intended spouses, Sandoval and Marta. The Robles are landed aristocracy who speak Spanish among themselves, even to the point of maintaining the honorific title “Don” [“Sir”] inherited from Spain. Their comportment in general hearkens back to the legacy of the empire that held sway in the Philippines until 1898. On the eve of World War II, however, they border on the anachronistic, with their wealth based on old agricultural holdings rather than any industrial or otherwise modern sector of the economy introduced by the United States. Most of the Robles are oblivious to domestic and international realities and live in a cocooned high society world.

Although Balmori does seem to criticize the hispanized elite of his day as a relatively effete and clueless lot compared to preceding aristocratic generations, they emerge as clearly preferable to the professional class that is evidently taking their place in modern Manila. Every individual in the novel with formal training or an actual skill set is dismissed with a sneer, from Sandoval the doctor to Anselmi the music teacher to Von Kauffman the physician to Andrade, a journalist who



collaborates with the Japanese. At one point Fernando, who takes turns with Don Lino and Don Ramón at voicing sociopolitical positions, even says of a group of minor characters who represent “la flor y nata profesional del país, todos doctores” [“the crème de la crème of society, all doctors”] that “aquella sociedad le resultaba grosera, indeseable” [“that society struck him as vulgar, undesirable”] (85, 86).<sup>10</sup> Fernando himself “Odiaba los estudios” [“Hated studying”] and that was just fine by his father because “El país estaba lleno de profesionales que no servían más que de estorbo. Robles con sus vastas propiedades y sus millones en los Bancos, tenía por demás asegurado el porvenir de sus hijos” [“The country was full of professionals who were good for nothing except for being a nuisance. Robles {i.e., Don Lino} with his vast properties and his millions in the Banks anyway had the future of his children assured”] (24). The professionals are no match for Balmori’s romanticized peasantry: “¡Cuánto más dignos aquellas rústicas campesinas y aquellos ignorantes gañanes de la hacienda!” [“How much more honorable are those rustic peasant women and those ignorant peasant men from the estate!”] (86). Balmori does not allow political affiliations in the War to interfere much with his class prejudices, though he does grant, albeit snidely, Sandoval the distinction of at least joining the Filipino Army Medical Corps.<sup>11</sup>

The eradication of the entire Robles bloodline implies grimly that the hereditary landowning classes have been annihilated by the War. Don Ramón, the lone but heirless survivor, effectively voices this conclusion after the deaths of most of his family by implying to Andrade, the turncoat reporter, that he should no longer be referred to with the honorific Don, just as “Ramón Robles” (187). The “Robles” patronym in Spanish translates as “Oaks” in English. These trees, symbols of strength, have burned to the ground beneath the birds of fire. The destruction has been aided by Filipinos like Andrade, who became editor of a pro-Japanese newspaper. Yet his real sin is not betrayal of the nation so much as of the aristocracy: Andrade is pegged by Balmori as a malcontent even before the War when, on class grounds, he resents having to cover the high society wedding of Natalia and Sandoval (113).

It is not clear in the novel who might take the place of the rural plutocracy in the post-1945 Philippines. In historical reality, no one did; the surviving members of the class simply scooped up the land and capital of the dead and maintain their position today. But Balmori was not invested in the future in any case. The novel ends with a look backward to Columbus, not a look forward to a Philippines that would become independent just a year later. *The Birds of Fire* is essentially an eschatological text, a processing through fiction of the wrenching social end of a useless Spanish-speaking elite nearly half a century after Spain itself had been ejected from the islands. That is why the United States is unneeded as a foregrounded force or allegorical character in the novel. Ignoring almost entirely the United States presence in the Philippines after forty years of its penetrating every major aspect of Filipino culture takes a tremendous force of will. In *The Birds of Fire*, there is

not even the code-switching into English that had started appearing decades earlier in archipelagic literature in Spanish and among the real-life Filipino elite. The Robles live in a Spanish colonial world long after its collapse, rather blithely at that, and the Japanese destroy them before they comprehend clearly what is going on. The markers of their class would seem recognizable to any reader of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Latin American literature: rich landowners in whose service toil nameless peasants, the pale virginal daughters of that gilded class who play European classical music on the piano when not sitting innocently in edenic gardens and longing for their beaux or begging for intercessions from Mary on behalf of their beloveds, vigorous young men who come and go in the family mansions bearing news of the outside world, and so on.

The conclusion that *The Birds of Fire* is simply a reactionary artifact of a class whose extinction is not worth mourning is a tempting one. Hornedo, who with but a single journal article stands as the most important analyst of Filipino novels in Spanish and who situates *The Birds of Fire* as the penultimate Filipino novel in Spanish of any significance, reaches such a verdict not only on this particular text by Balmori but on the whole tradition to which he sees it as synecdochical: "Like all class literature, the Filipino novel in Spanish passed away with the class that wrote and read it" (422).<sup>12</sup> To Hornedo and other commentators, the primary reason to read *The Birds of Fire* is because it is the last major work of one of the most important Filipino writers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and because it is (supposedly) the only Filipino novel in Spanish written during and about World War II.<sup>13</sup> Both of these reasons are extratextual, however, and there are many nuances in the novel itself that make it deserving of readers and scholars on its own terms.

The family drama of the Robles, for instance, contains a number of elements that complicate any easy assumption of a straightforward story about a group of stock characters from the insular elite who are blown to smithereens by the War. First, the mere fact that a non-hereditary figure like Sandoval, a man with no aristocratic descent but with global travels and a professional education, can enter the Robles family via a pre-War marriage to Natalia suggests that the rural landowning class of the Philippines was suffering serious cracks well before the first bombs fell. Correspondingly, the betrothal before the War of the other Robles scion, Fernando, to Marta as a symbolically indigenous peasant girl and worthy parallel to Natalia, shows again that the traditional socioeconomic endogamy of the Filipino oligarchs was already in jeopardy before the Japanese arrived. Read allegorically, these two intended unions represent the attempt of the old hispanized elite of the islands to endure by uniting either with the new professional class (Sandoval) or the ancient peasant class (Marta). It is true that Marta is not actually poor, as her family has land and means, but the allegorical role she plays for Balmori is evident: "Belleza dulcemente indígena, de expresión soñadora y ojos lánguidos de mirar de esclava ... se educó en su casa, en su pueblo, en el santo amor a Dios y en la sencillez y la virtud de las costumbres

campesinas" ["Sweetly indigenous beauty of a dreaming countenance and the languid eyes of the look of a slave ... she was educated at home, in her village, in the saintly love of God and in the simplicity and virtue of peasant customs"] (25). Marta, erotic and wealthy and submissive before God and man, may seem an unlikely version of an indigenous peasant, but that is how Balmori fashions her.

In the novel, Marta comes off rather better than Sandoval, but neither one represents a way toward survival of the hispanized aristocracy via class crossfertilization. Sandoval dies in the War and, though he has claimed to impregnate Natalia on their honeymoon in Baguio (a town, notably, built by the United States as a mountain retreat for its colonial troops), Don Lino can see no sign of it. This does not stop him from enthusing about how the prospective child could be named Lino as well and thus carry forward the family. Such literal reproduction, however, does not come to be in any case because when the Japanese finally arrive at the Robles family mansion, Natalia is gang raped and dies (174-75). As for the potential union of the elites with the peasants, Fernando and Marta never do marry because he is called up to the army before the ceremony is held. Later, after recovering from battle wounds, Fernando has an opportunity to rejoin Marta—"temblando de pasión" ["trembling with passion"] in her garden, he gazes upon her through a window as she prays to an image of Mary—but he chooses instead to reenter the War out of his duty to the patria and to his dead father and sister (190). Subsequently, Fernando leads anti-Japanese guerrilla forces, "más de mil hombres decididos y bravos" ["more than a thousand determined and brave men"], and becomes something of a folk hero (192). Yet Balmori eventually judges his decision to be an error: faced with dedication to the survival of his country and dedication to the survival of his class, Fernando should have opted for the latter. He did not, however, and so he dies in the final stages of the war without having married Marta and without having produced a real or symbolic heir. The elites will not be saved by indigenous (pseudo) peasants either.

The allegorical implications of the Robles family extend further in various directions. Despite the emphasis on the parental generation, there is no featured maternal figure in the story. Don Ramón is unmarried and Don Lino is a widower who longs for Haruko, a woman in Japan whom he had courted in Kyoto five years earlier. With unadulterated orientalism, Don Lino describes Haruko to his brother as "Bella como un templo de oro, suave como la seda y los pétalos de las flores del cerezo. Me hizo feliz con su amor tímido y reverente. Esas mujeres saben amar. Si alguna vez necesitas a tu lado una mujer amante, ¡búscate una japonesa!" ["Beautiful as a golden temple, soft as silk and the petals of cherry blossoms. She made me happy with her timid and reverent love. Those women know how to love. If at some point you need by your side a loving woman, look for a Japanese!"] (42).<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately for Don Lino, Haruko sends a regretful letter to him in September 1941 implying that she had tired of waiting and so had married a Japanese

man a year earlier and now was expecting a child (95). At the roughest level of interpretation, there goes the symbolic option of a successful union between the Philippines and Japan. This takes place just three months before Japanese war planes fly over Manila and so is a foreshadowing of harsher divergences to come.

With the maternal role remaining unfilled among the Robles, it is substituted metaphorically by a conflated array of feminized personas and personifications all treated as virginal purities: Natalia, her dead mother, Marta, Mary, and the Philippines. These five characters are all described with identical discourses, each a sort of prelapsarian Eve (that is why there are so many garden scenes), each being pristine regardless of whether they have produced offspring or not. Haruko incarnates an orientalized version of the same. But the prelapsarian Eve does not leave the Garden in this novel: she, or rather the archipelago, or rather Natalia, instead gets violated by the Japanese. This is where *The Birds of Fire* diverges from the tendencies of Filipino novels in Spanish dating back to the very first, Paterno's *Ninay*. In many of those other texts, the natural resources of people and places that are gendered female and exploitable end in real or symbolic passing from this world (e.g., with death or removal to a nunnery), but mass sadism is never so explicitly the cause. The house of Robles does not fall in this novel; it is obliterated with sexual ferocity.

Meanwhile, the fact that Ramón, the lone blood survivor of the Robles clan, is not only a childless bachelor but also does not like women at all, opens the novel up to a potential queering whose implications are well worth exploring. Don Lino notes that his brother is an “enemigo de los placeres, indiferente a la mujer, seco y frío como un árbol sin ramas y sin nidos” [“enemy of pleasures, indifferent to women, dry and cold like a tree without branches and without nests”] (52). The premise that heteronormativity is a prerequisite for nation building, symbolic or otherwise, is nothing new, but the apparent asexuality of Ramón competes in this case with a cast flush with equally apparently asexual female figures. Again, this is irrespective of whether the latter prove able to conceive. Fruitfulness may be attributed in *The Birds of Fire* but it does not necessarily mean deflowerment, whether in the case of Mary (whose pregnancy is immaculate), Natalia (whose pregnancy is alleged but visually undemonstrated), her dead mother (who is angelic to the point where “Su cuerpo parecía tener luz. Su alma era el alma de las arpas que cantan” [“Her body seemed to give off light. Her soul was the soul of the harps that sing”]), or the Philippines (whose natural resources are routinely described as edenic) (92). Marta, the indigenous peasant stand-in, does not get to have virtual sex in the first place and so stays a model of purity despite such scenes as when Fernando paraphrases her body language as follows: “¡Tómame! ¡Sórbeme!” —parecía clamarle en suspiros y en sollozos—; ¡que la savia de mi vida te caliente las venas!” [“‘Take me! Slurp me!’ she seemed to cry out in sighs and sobs, ‘may the sap of my life make your veins run hot!’”] (31). The abundant earlier virgins in Paterno and Rizal are not nearly as sexualized as Marta,

but she fits easily among them nonetheless with her angelic religiosity, proclivity for melodramatic emotional displays (sobs, moans, tragic pallor, fainting, etc.), and enduring chastity.

In terms of political readings of the novel, Balmori does give space for Filipino guerrillas to act in understandable reaction to Japanese atrocities—resistance by rural irregulars was an important historical phenomenon in the War—but ultimately he cannot stomach the class and social upheaval that they represent. He not only suggests that Romantic love should triumph over the desire to fight against oppression, to wit the moral of Fernando and Marta, but so should Christian theology. The family priest of the Robles thus tells the workers and peasants in arms that killing is unethical and advises the following: “someteos al orden, aprended a sufrir, resignaos a esperar. Es por la voluntad del Altísimo que suceden estas cosas” [“submit yourselves to order, learn to suffer, resign yourselves to waiting. It is the will of the Highest that these things happen”] (180). Balmori upholds with such positions the primacy of class, family, and the church, a trinity of the status quo.

Every disruption of every kind against established order, whether that order be Japanese or Filipino, is criticized by Balmori. A key example is that of Pablo, the foreman of the Robles estate who takes to the hills with his fellow laborers to fight against the Japanese. In other authorial hands, Pablo would be represented as heroic, but in *The Birds of Fire* he is portrayed as a diabolical upstart. When the family priest tells him to resign himself to Japanese atrocities and not fight back, Pablo orders his men to “Atadle a un árbol y dejad que allí se lo coman las hormigas. Si le damos libertad, nos venderá” [“Tie him to a tree and let the ants eat him there. If we free him, he will sell us out to the enemy”] (180). Balmori, however, immediately has Pablo’s own men disobey his orders and free the priest. And later, when Pablo works for Fernando as the foreman of the latter’s guerrilla army—the wartime hierarchy of the Robles reproduces neatly here that in peacetime—Pablo shoots a Japanese prisoner against Fernando’s wishes and the young aristocrat yells, “¿Y quién es Pablo para dar órdenes contrarias a las mías?” [“And who is Pablo to give orders contrary to my own?”] (198). Once again in Balmori, a non-aristocrat commits the cardinal sin of not following the wishes and value systems of his presumptive superiors.

In representing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the puppet Philippine Republic, Balmori inserts support for them in the voice of Andrade, the reporter who is not only a quisling on national grounds but also a member of the professional class that Balmori detests:

Elevaron al pobre diablo de Andrade al puesto de director de “La Linterna.” Y Andrade, sintiéndose más japonés que Tokio, se dedicó desde el primer instante a loar en todos los estilos y por todos los medios las fantásticas glorias del Asia oriental más grande. Empezó públicamente a comer en cuclillas, renunciando a los cubiertos por los asiáticos palillos ... Un buen día. “La Linterna” amaneció repicando todas

sus campanillas y todos sus cascabeles. El Japón se aprestaba a dar la independencia a Filipinas. Oh, corazón inmenso y generoso! Oh, nación bendita y alabada! Lo que nunca quiso hacer América! Lo que jamás pensó hacer España! Ya teníamos república, redención, libertad! (183-85)

[They elevated the poor devil Andrade to the position of director of *The Lantern*. And Andrade, feeling himself to be more Japanese than Tokyo, dedicated himself from the first instant to praise in all ways and by all means the fantastic glories of the Greater East Asia. He began publicly eating by squatting, renouncing cutlery for Asian chopsticks ... A good day. *The Lantern* dawned ringing all its hand bells and all its jingle bells. Japan was preparing to give independence to the Philippines. Oh, immense and generous heart! Oh, blessed and praiseworthy nation! What America never wanted to do! What Spain never thought to do! Now we had a Republic, redemption, liberty!]

Balmori mimics self-glorifying Japanese discourse to satirize the imperial shells that are the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the Philippine Republic. His real target, however, is not political institutions imposed from abroad but the potential clout of a new native class. This concern about the rise of non-hereditary power is unfortunate but in no sense parochial. The reasons why the class position of the Robles is in decline with and without the War—indeed, the reasons why their own class exists in the first place—is intimately tied to forces and flows of worldwide scale: the clashes of successive empires for transoceanic dominance and the rise and fall of certain international market regimes and the local proxies needed to sustain them. At stake are the sociopolitical and socioeconomic superstructures of a globalized modernity that continually shifts the ground upon which generations of Robles try to stand. *The Birds of Fire* appears to offer a myopic and mournful gaze upon the increasingly anachronistic existence of hispanophone Filipino elites. If this were so, it would be an artifact of minor curiosity at best. But actually, via its allegories, the novel engages vigorously with forces from the world over, and does so from a vantage never before considered. The story of World War II, and more broadly of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is incomplete without it.

Given the obscurity of the Filipino literary tradition in Spanish and its paradoxically global import, interrogations of its texts should aim not to claim definitive readings but to open up spaces for further discussion. Additional theorizations of *The Birds of Fire* that await, for example, could address its persisting orientalizations, such as the depiction of the Japanese as semihuman hypersexed sadists and the stereotypical fantasies of Don Lino about golden temples and geishas



and Japanese creation legends (42, 99, 15). Filipino characters in both novels repeatedly deny that they are “asiáticos” [“Asian”], with Balmori’s narrator and Fernando emphasizing time and again that Filipinos are not “amarillos” [“yellow”] like the barbaric invaders (passim). This relates directly to larger questions of how “Asia” is and can be conceptualized, an issue that impacts any number of academic fields and approaches. The history of Filipino novels in Spanish that adopt Western vantages in the course of orientalizing dates back to the first fictions by Paterno and Rizal, yet it is rarely considered that such discourses need not emanate from the geographic West. Again, these are matters relevant to every reader who engages with orientalist issues, which is to say, in the broadest sense of those issues, all of us. To assume that Filipino literature in Spanish ought be viewed as an inconsequential dead end of merely national interest is a mistake.

Particularly suggestive would be a study of the disparate invocations of older history in *The Birds of Fire*, not only that of the Spanish-era Philippines but also of moments in more distant centuries. Amid the rubble of Manila in 1945, Balmori concludes *The Birds of Fire* with a breathtaking paean to Columbus, whose “visión de América ... iba a ser redención para los pueblos sin libertad, firme sostén para la humanidad caída, pan y vino de amor para los que han hambre y sed de justicia, lecho de plumas y de flores para el mundo herido.... [sic]” [“vision of America ... was going to be redemption for all the peoples without liberty, steady support for fallen humanity, bread and wine of love for those who have hunger and thirst for justice, bed of feathers and of flowers for the wounded world...{sic}”] (210-11). This phrasing merits a monograph unto itself, with Spanish imperial history folded into that of the New World—of which the Philippines, as was often the case prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is here considered implicitly an extension—amid a symbolic discourse that is postlapsarian, eucharistic, and millennial all at once. One implication seems to be a logic that just as Columbus saved the world by coming across America, now America (in the form of the United States) was coming (again) upon the Philippines to do the same. In other Pacific literatures written in Western languages about Western presences in Asia, are similar premises ever offered?

Whatever future investigations are undertaken of *The Birds of Fire* and of Filipino literature in Spanish in general, one thing is certain: global literary history will be revised as a result. This is true despite the anonymity of the tradition, despite its dearth of readers then and now, despite the fact that its principal concerns may no longer be those of its land of origin and perhaps never were. Southeast Asian literature written from a center of the greatest conflict in history in a European language during an East Asian occupation over a North American colonizer is not a phenomenon without worldwide implications. Balmori may not have produced a masterpiece in his novel but he did produce a singularly globalized text, and that is why he should be read. The literature of an intertwined humanity is bereft without him. The purpose of art and artistic analysis is not, after all, to leave us confirmed in the narrative of the world that we already possess.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Alinea's description of its plot suggests a firsthand familiarity with the novel, though the summary theoretically could have been lifted from another, unknown source (97-98).
- <sup>2</sup> In the summer of 2008, intrigued by the idea of the lost manuscript, I searched major Manila archives for it and found it the moment I checked the Ateneo library. I made a copy of it at that time in order to write this paper.
- <sup>3</sup> Donoso Jiménez also indicates that Hornedo is "F.H.H." (lxii).
- <sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the extant versions of *The Birds of Fire*, see Donoso Jiménez (lviii-lxii; lxix-lxx). The prefatory note by Hornedo on the microfilm indicates that the original manuscript was kept "at the Special Collections department of [sic] Filipiniana division of the National Library" ("To The Reader").
- <sup>5</sup> Mariño writes, "In his third novel *Pájaros de Fuego*, the protagonist does not only accept the existence of a supreme creator but also the limitations of society. Written during his forced retirement during World War II, this novel, distinctly patriotic in content, is considered the most important prose work of Balmori" (xv). This description in turn may be a paraphrase of Alinea's comments.
- <sup>6</sup> This consensus, however, is unlikely to hold for much longer, as many other texts that could be called novels appeared in periodicals during the years between Rizal and Balmori.
- <sup>7</sup> The roofs of traditional Filipino huts were thatched with leaves of the nipa tree. The nipa hut generally stands in Filipino literature as a national symbol.
- <sup>8</sup> This version of the passage in the published edition of *The Birds of Fire* varies slightly from the Ateneo de Manila University microfilm of the novel that it uses as a base text by adding three minor punctuation marks (an inverted exclamation point before "Salve" and inverted question marks before "En dónde" and "En qué") and putting forth "qué abismos" ["what abysses"] instead of "sus abismos" ["their abysses"]. These are not substantive changes in terms of content but, oddly, they are also not noted among the otherwise abundant footnotes that seem to enumerate scrupulously all discrepancies between the Ateneo microfilm and the original manuscript, which are the only two sources for the published version. It is unclear who introduced these alterations or why, although they seem to be intended generally to clarify the passage and make it more consistent with standard Spanish. Such unattributed and unacknowledged alterations appear in at least one other place in the published version of *The Birds of Fire*.
- <sup>9</sup> Balmori writes in his own prefatory note to the novel that the pages of *The Birds of Fire* that he wrote during the War "Se salvaron milagrosamente por haber sido guardadas en frascos de cristal que fui enterrando en el jardín de mi casa. Vanos fueron los repetidos asaltos que para requisarme efectuaron los esbirros japoneses" ["were miraculously saved by being kept in glass bottles that I kept burying in the garden of my house. Vain were the repeated assaults carried out by the Japanese thugs to search me"] (5).
- <sup>10</sup> The characters are "all doctors" in the university degree sense. One is a physician but the group also includes a lawyer, an optician, a dentist, a professor, and a veterinarian (85).

- <sup>11</sup> Balmori suggests that Sandoval mostly joined the Medical Corps because many of his peers were doing so (74). Donoso Jiménez states inaccurately that Sandoval “se venderá como colaboracionista del mando japonés” (“sells himself as a collaborationist to the Japanese command”) (liv).
- <sup>12</sup> Hornedo implies that Antonio Abad’s *La vida secreta de Daniel Espeña* [*The Secret Life of Daniel Espeña*] of 1960 was the only important Filipino novel in Spanish after *The Birds of Fire* (“Notes” 415).
- <sup>13</sup> Donoso Jiménez in 2010 repeats Hornedo’s conclusion in 1980 that *The Birds of Fire* “Se trata de la única novela en español sobre la Segunda Guerra Mundial en el Pacífico escrita por un asiático contemporáneamente al conflicto” [“Is the only novel in Spanish about the Second World War in the Pacific written by an Asian contemporary to the conflict”] (l). Hornedo says *The Birds of Fire* “is the only known [Filipino] novel in Spanish written in and about World War II” (“Notes” 412). However, a novel entitled *Fíame (Filipinas-América)* [*Trust in Me (Philippines-America)*] by the Filipino judge Mariano L. De La Rosa notes on its copyright page that “es una novela comenzada antes, continuada durante y terminada después de la segunda guerra mundial” [“it is a novel begun before, continued during and finished after the Second World War”].
- <sup>14</sup> Don Lino’s enthusiasm for Japanese culture, flush with stereotypes, dovetails often with that of a younger Balmori. In 1902, when just a teenager, Balmori visited Japan, a country that, according to Donoso Jiménez, “se le representa como un referente cultural, un modelo de progreso para los pueblos asiáticos. De ahí la admiración por la cultura japonesa, la cual deviene un elemento fundamental en su propia creación artística” [“signifies for him a cultural referent, a model of progress for the Asian peoples. That is the source of his admiration for Japanese culture, which becomes a fundamental element in his own artistic creation”] (xxxiii). See Donoso Jiménez for an analysis of Balmori’s 1932 poetic text *Nippón* [*Japan*] and its sundry idealizations and orientalizations (xxxiii-xxxviii).

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