

# INSIDE OUT, OUTSIDE IN

## TEACHING WORLD LITERATURE THROUGH PHILIPPINE LITERATURE

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### **Abstract**

How to fit a subject so immense into curricular space so small is a continuing challenge in Philippine education, particularly when there are sweeping curricular changes as in the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (“K-12”). This paper critiques mechanistic conceptions of “world literature” and “Philippine regional literature” under the proposed new curriculum, and proposes an approach that stresses the interactive, mutually constitutive relations between the two, and thus requires a pedagogical plan in which world literature is taught through Philippine literature, and vice versa. The approach is based not only on the assumption that the two (world/nation) should not be viewed as separate, but that the cultivation of a creative, critical mindset — rather than a survey approach that puts a premium on data accumulation — is the primary purpose in the teaching of literature.

### **About the Author**

Resil B. Mojares is Professor Emeritus at the University of San Carlos in Cebu City, and has served as visiting professor in universities in Japan, Singapore, and the United States. His prize-winning books include *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel* (1979), *Waiting for Mariang Makiling: Essays in Philippine Cultural History* (2002), *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de Los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge* (2006), and *Isabelo's Archive* (2013). In 2013, he was conferred the Tanglaw ng Lahi Award by Ateneo de Manila University for his contributions to Philippine cultural studies.

**{1} How does one fit a subject so immense into curricular space so small?**

This is one of the challenges raised in the debate on the teaching of literature under the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (better-known as “K-12”), which requires the teaching of “World Literature” and “Philippine Regional Literature” as two distinct sections of a single, three-unit course in the senior high-school level.<sup>1</sup>

Critics of the K-12 plan have reacted to the decision to reduce the number of hours for literature courses from 160 to 80 by collapsing the two subjects, World Literature and Philippine Regional Literature, into a single course – a decision that, I strongly suspect, is a product of bureaucratic laziness, the simple expedience of accommodating competing interests in the contest for curricular space, rather than a well thought-out position on how essential the subjects are and how effectively and meaningfully they can be taught.

**{2} I must state at the outset that I am not an “education expert,” and that I have not been sufficiently attentive to questions of curriculum development and teaching methods, an indifference perhaps borne out of a cynicism over the history of a Philippine education system that people have called “a graveyard of experiments.” What I have to say, therefore, has less to do with the protest that literature teachers have registered against the reduction of hours devoted to literature (which, of course, I am not happy about); I am more interested in certain theoretical issues in the teaching of world, national, and regional literatures, and the learning approaches in addressing these issues.**

An issue that the current debate has largely set aside is the question: How indeed can one fit a subject as huge as “world literature” into curricular space so small?

The answer lies in perspective, scale and the principles of selection and limitation by which (as one scholar elegantly puts it) “the conceptually infinite is asked to submit to cultural and institutional needs that are, unfortunately, all too finite” (Carroll vii).

I do not agree with those who say that combining World Literature and Philippine Regional Literature in a single class is “pedagogically impossible” (Zulueta). In fact, I think it is pedagogically desirable. (This view is not meant to be taken as an endorsement of what the K-12 planners have done. Even as the two subjects have been combined, I understand that Philippine and world literatures will be taught as two distinct parts of one course rather than integrated into a single learning module.)

I argue that integrating the two subjects is desirable because our tendency to compartmentalize subjects elides or obscures the vital and necessary interrelations among them. This tendency to separate the “Philippines” and the “world,” if it is

not simple bureaucratic expedience, betrays a habitual patriotic reflex and sense of cultural insecurity that predispose people to preferentially carve out separate space for Philippine literature, anxious that in the panoramic view of the world it will disappear.

The fact of the matter is that Philippine literature is a necessary constituent of world literature. It is heavily penetrated, driven, contaminated, and constituted by influences from other parts of the globe. To conceive of a national literature apart from the world is not possible. The very idea of a “national literature” is a product of both “nationalizing” and “internationalizing” factors: the impulse to assert difference, based on a claim to a distinct culture, history, and identity; and at the same time the recognition that this literature can only grow through a vital conversation with the rest of the world (See Mojares 213-21).

If one believes that it is pedagogically wise to teach students by setting out from where they are, instead of from somewhere else, is it not therefore desirable that we teach world literature *from* and *through* our own literature?

### **{3} Let me sketch as to how this can be done.**

We can begin by thinking in terms of dynamic relations and determinations instead of set categories and blocs of knowledge. Thinking in these terms should lead us away from certain parochialisms that would make of “Philippine literature” something intelligible apart from the “world.”

Globalization (the catchword of the day) is not a phenomenon of the present or the future; it is of the past as well. It is a process that was already underway in the sixteenth century (in the case of the Philippines) when geographic discoveries, imperial conquest, religious evangelization, and commercial trade started to escalate, linking more and larger areas of the world.

The Filipino conversation with the world (though *conversation* is too genteel a word for what actually happened) can be illustrated with a few literary facts: the first book to be authored by a Filipino, Tomas Pinpin’s *Libro* (1610), was a manual to help Tagalogs learn Castilian; the first book of poetry written by a Filipino, Bartolome Saguinsin’s *Epigrammata* (1766), was a book of Roman-style epigrams, written in Latin (see Mojares 80-87); our greatest writer, Jose Rizal, used a European form (the novel), wrote in Spanish, and even considered writing it in French.

Though globalization is usually taken to be antithetical to nationalism and the nation, we must remember that it is precisely the dynamic of creating world-systems (or “empires,” to use an old word)—with its false promise of “universal harmony,” mystification of inequality, and threat of homogenization—that nourished the assertions of difference and autonomy that gave rise to modern nations.

The binary thinking behind the world/nation divide is also behind the region/nation divide. Why the stress on the *regional* in the K-12 curriculum? I appreciate what I imagine are the motives for this stress: that it is pedagogically effective to start out from the learner's own home environment; that it is theoretically and critically sound to begin with the nation's "local" (or "regional") constituents instead of assuming that the "national" is already given and unproblematic. I am not comfortable however (and even offended) by how the literatures in Cebuano, Iloko, or Maranao are commonly labeled "regional," with what that word suggests of a subsidiary relationship to something larger and more important, of what is merely local and not-quite-national. If we think of Hiligaynon or Iloko writing as "regional," what then is "national"—writings in English, in *Pilipino*? I have been told that what the K-12 planners mean by "regional" is the home environment of students wherever they are, encompassing in effect everything in Philippine literature. Then why call it "regional"?

All these may seem like a long digression from the topic of this paper. But I am simply stressing that the idea and reality of "nation" and "world," or "nation" and "region," are vitally connected, mutually formative, and simultaneously existent, we cannot begin to understand one without the other.

#### **{4} What is called for is an approach that holds these polarities within view at the same time.**

In large, what I would like to suggest is a comparativist approach in teaching world literature *through* Philippine literature, and vice versa. It involves the parallel or comparative reading of texts from the Philippines and elsewhere in the world, tacking between one and the other in a process of moving inside out and outside in.

The pairings of texts can be based on relations of direct influence, cultural homology, or thematic correspondence.

By relations of direct influence, I mean translations, adaptations, or retellings of foreign literary works. The examples can go back to *Maharadia Lawana*, the Maranao prose narrative derived from the Indian epic *Ramayana*; the Tagalog Joaquin Tuason's *Ang Bagong Robinson* (1879), a version of Daniel Defoe's famous novel *Robinson Crusoe*; or Jose Rizal's *Guillermo Tell* (1886), a translation of Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*. Recent examples are numerous and include translations into Philippine languages of works by foreign authors like Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney, Yannis Ritsos, and Pablo Neruda.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, the flow of translation is imbalanced (there are not too many non-English Filipino works translated into foreign languages), but while this is an important issue in literary history, it is not a practical obstacle in the case we are dealing with since we do not intend to have senior high school students read texts in German or French. But if one is interested in a more balanced exchange, one

can find examples, as in the interesting two-way literary interaction of the Filipino poet Marjorie Evasco and the Cuban poet Alex Fleites in the bilingual (English and Spanish) book, *Fishes of Light / Peces de Luz* (2013), in which they engage in a poetic dialogue in the form of the Japanese *tanrenga*. This is a particularly useful example since it offers, in a single work, entry into Philippine, Cuban, and Japanese literatures.

By relations of homology, I mean works that are similar in form and style not by virtue of direct influence but a similarity in the material conditions, social structure, and lived experience of the groups that produced them. Examples are the toponymic poems and narratives of the Subanos of the Zamboanga peninsula and those of the Western Apache of North America and the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, as well as similar literary forms (like the brief narrative sketch called *dagli* in Tagalog) that emerged in Philippine and, say, Indonesian or British literatures, not so much because of direct influence as the similar conditions in literary production experienced in these countries (in the case of the *dagli*, the opportunities and constraints of early print culture).<sup>3</sup>

The most numerous and accessible examples are provided by relations of thematic correspondence, works that deal with the same subject matter or experience even if these were written out of dissimilar times and traditions. These can include, for instance, the stories of rural exploitation and poverty by the Cebuano Marcel Navarra or the Tagalog Rogelio Sikat, compared with the stories of the Chinese writer Lu Xun or the Indian writer Mahasweta Devi; the stories of Muslim life by Ibrahim Jubaira, compared with those of the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz; stories of migrant workers and the diaspora by Filipino and Thai or Sri Lankan authors; poetry on love by Filipino and Singaporean writers; and Filipino stories of life under the Marcos dictatorship, compared with stories of living in an authoritarian state by writers in Central Europe or Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Consider one more example. A collection of stories, *Manila Noir*, appeared in 2013, part of a successful series launched in 2004 by New York's Akashic Books, of *noir* stories about cities in the world, written by writers in or from the featured city (see Hagedorn). How distinct is the concept of *noir* (and its associated notions of crime, violence, and society) imagined or represented by Filipino writers, if we compare *Manila Noir* with the volumes in the Akashic series that deal with, say, New Delhi, Lagos, or Havana?

One can think of other parallels and correspondences, such as local renderings and versions of foreign forms, like the sonnet and haiku (examples of which are the Cebuano versions of the sonnet, called *sonanoy* and *siniloy*, by Fernando Buyser and Diosdado Alesna); or a foreign writer writing about the Philippines (as in the case of the Philippine poems of the late Spanish poet Jaime Gil de Biedma, who lived in Manila in the 1950s as a Tabacalera executive) or a recognizably Philippine subject (examples would be the American poet John Ashbery's "Memories of Imperialism" and the Polish poet Wistawa Szymborska's "Tarsier").

The possibilities are many. My point is that we do not have to go far to find the world, we can find it in Philippine literature.

**{5} I fully understand that we are speaking of a senior-level secondary course in literature, not advanced literary studies. It goes without saying that this fact must guide text selections and teaching style and approaches.**

It is evident from what I have been saying that I am imagining a course that is anchored in the reading of texts, instead of a broad survey course that gives primacy to the accumulation of information in the hopeless pursuit of “covering ground” that is simply too broad to comprehend.

I think it is also apparent that I am inclined towards a more open selection of texts rather than a course limited to a fixed canon of “classics” or Great Works, one that excludes the literatures of much of the world (including the Philippines). Departing from the canon, that the student views as one does monuments or museum pieces, the course should instead immerse the student in the play of similarities and differences that is the defining characteristic of world literature. I am not endorsing, however, what I have seen of World Literature textbooks in the local market, which, while giving primacy to literary texts themselves, have put together a smorgasbord of texts without any clear attempt at a certain pattern or coherence outside of the fact that these texts come from different regions of the world.

Giving primacy to the texts themselves is the reason, I assume, why the curriculum is limiting the course content to the “21<sup>st</sup> century”: to unburden the course of having to deal with large masses of historical data, and focus on texts that are contemporary and closest to the student’s experience. I am therefore bothered (and surprised) by the report that course expectations for students of literature in K-12 are such that they are expected to know such facts as the names of twenty Nobel laureates in literature and the titles of at least one of their major works; the names of all Philippine National Artists and honorees of the Palanca Awards Hall of Fame; and similar other bits of useless information. (I say “useless” if these are just names and titles, but also because if one really has a need to know, it is easier to Google than attend school. The expansion of electronic media unburdens the teacher of the task of purveying information; it shifts the focus to the teacher as critical guide to the use of information.)

If the aim of the new curriculum, as the Department of Education grandly envisions, is the production of the “holistically developed Filipino with 21<sup>st</sup>- century skills,” the emphasis then should be on teaching the student how to read (a skill that is foundational in education and one most highly exercised in the reading of literary texts) rather than knowing the names of Nobel Prize or Palanca winners.

Today, renewed interest in the concept of “world literature” has led to fresh revisionings of how it is to be construed and approached. Reconceptualizations of the field have included the shift away from the hoary surveys of nations and civilizations to the more dynamic understanding of the workings of a “world literary system,” and the shift away from thinking of world literature as a set of works, or the sum total of all the literature in the world, towards seeing it as an approach to literature, a mode of reading, and of engaging with a world not one’s own.<sup>5</sup> This critical ferment should vitalize the teaching of world literature in the Philippines, and the current debate over K-12 should be seized as an opportunity for a serious reexamination of how literature is taught rather than one more instance of tinkering with Philippine curricular systems.

**{6} It is important to end this with a few cautionary remarks about the kind of comparative textual studies I have proposed.**

Comparisons are a complex and sensitive undertaking since we begin with the historic reality of unequal exchange between Philippine literature and the “big” or “dominant” literatures of the world. In speaking of the “global” character of Philippine literature, we must avoid what we may call the “Manny Pacquiao syndrome,” the tendency to over-celebrate “global” achievements or connections, both real and trivial. One may introduce here the illustrative fact that T.S. Eliot’s first writings dealt with the Philippines or that Ernest Hemingway was in Manila and interacted with Filipino writers in 1941.<sup>6</sup> These facts are of some interest to spice up the lesson that the Philippines is linked to the world, or if one is interested in literary trivia. But these facts are either marginal or irrelevant to the literary achievements of Eliot and Hemingway even as they may be interesting footnotes to these authors’ biography and personality. Beyond these, such connections may be important only as notes on Filipino cultural provincialism.

There are then certain principles that must be stressed if we are to follow the comparative approach proposed here.

Texts need to be properly located in the specificities of time and space so that the students can fully appreciate where these texts are coming from, or who is speaking from where. They are ways of exploring and explaining a diverse world, of seeing similarities in difference, of appreciating difference in what seems the same.

Texts have to be chosen and taught with an eye for parity. The autonomy and integrity of literary creations, whether local or foreign, have to be stressed, resisting tendencies to reduce, absorb, or subordinate one to the other.

Finally, we must remind ourselves that while we can read literary works as social documents, we must not lose sight of the *literary* in literature, and of the values literature promotes: cultivating the students’ critical and imaginative powers;

creating the appreciation and appetite for literature as a singular and enriching way of looking at, speaking about, and being in the world.



## Notes

Plenary paper presented at the conference-workshop on “Literature, Region, and the World in K-12,” at Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Feb. 15, 2014, sponsored by Kritika Kultura and the Ateneo Center for English Language Teaching.

1. This paper was written in the context of the debate on the place of literature under the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (“K-12”), which added two years to the old ten-year, state-prescribed pre-university education program. In the new program, what was initially proposed as two literature courses (allotted 80 hours each) in the senior high-school level – “21<sup>st</sup>-Century Philippine Literature from the Regions” and “21<sup>st</sup>-Century World Literature” – had been changed, at the time of the conference, into two 40-hour sections of a single literature course in Grade 12.
2. See Juan R. Francisco, *Maharadia Lawana* (Quezon City: Philippine Folklore Society, 1969); Ramon Guillermo, *Translation & Revolution: A Study of Jose Rizal's Guillermo Tell* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009); Ramon Guillermo, “Themes of Invention, Help, and Will: Joachim Campe’s *Robinson der Jungere* in Tagalog and Bahasa Melayu Translations,” *Southeast Asian Studies*, 3:1 (April 2014), 3-47.

For contemporary examples: Jose F. Lacaba’s *Sa Panahon ng Ligalig* (Maynila: Anvil Publishing, 1991) and *Edad Medya* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2000), containing Tagalog translations of such poets as William Butler Yeats, Cesar Vallejo, and Wislawa Szymborska; Virigilio S. Almario, ed., *Pablo Neruda: Mga Piling Tula* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2004); *Literatura Aleman: Dagiti Napili a Sinurat Manipud iti* (Manila: Regal Publishing, 1974), Iloko translations from Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, and others; Andres Cristobal Cruz, *Paghahanap at Iba Pang Kwentong Aleman* (Maynila: Regal Publishing, 1967), with Tagalog translations from writers like Alfred Andersch and Anna Seghers; and Vicente Bandillo’s *Tsinelas nga Nalubong sa Danaw* (Sugbo: Oquiab ug Gual, 2009), with translations into Cebuano, by way of English, of the French Jean Follain and the Greek Yannis Ritsos, among others.

For drama, see the prodigious work of Rolando Tinio in the translation into Tagalog of plays by Anton Chekhov, Samuel Beckett, and others.

3. On toponymic poems and the *dagli*, respectively, see Resil B. Mojares, “A Poem of the Names of All the Rivers,” *Isabelo’s Archive*, Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, 2013, 65-69; and Roland B. Tolentino and Aristotle J. Atienza, eds., *Ang Dagling Tagalog, 1903-1936*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007.
4. Compare, for instance, the Filipino and Singaporean love poems in *Love Gathers All: The Philippines-Singapore Anthology of Love Poetry*, ed. A. Lee, et al.

- (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2002). On stories of the martial law period: Gregorio C. Brillantes, "A Taste for the Fine Whiskey of the Bourgeoisie," *The Apollo Centennial* (Manila: National Book Store, 1980), 23-31; Ricardo Lee, "Kabilang sa mga Nawawala," *Philippine Literature: A History & Anthology*, ed. Bienvenido Lumbera and Cynthia N. Lumbera (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1997), 393-409.
5. On current interrogations of the concept of "world literature," see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004); Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London: Continuum, 2008).
  6. Stimulated by the U.S. annexation of the Philippines in 1898 and a visit to the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, the teenage T.S. Eliot wrote journalistic pieces on the Philippines and the short story "The Man Who Was King" (1905), said to be inspired by his encounter with the Igorots at the exposition.

Ernest Hemingway visited Manila in 1941 in the course of a journalistic tour of Asia. Hemingway was lionized by Filipino writers. Hemingway's own view of the visit was far from romantic. He despised Manila, showed little interest in the Philippines, and was drunk and miserable through most of the five days of his stay. He found the dinner given in his honor by the Philippine Writers' Association ghastly and boring, and was sick (so he said) of people talking to him about *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that he told his wife, the journalist Martha Gellhorn, that they should go to a place where no one reads books in English.

On Hemingway's visit, see George Monteiro, "'Just the Little Things': Newly Discovered Sources for Hemingway's 1941 Manila Stay," *The Hemingway Review*, 30:1 (2010), 165-67; Peter Moreira, *Hemingway on the China Front* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 179-81; Lucila V. Hosillos, *Philippine-American Relations, 1898-1941* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1969), 73; Federico Mangahas, "Our Literature – Today and Tomorrow," *The Literary Apprentice* (1952), 148; Edilberto N. Alegre & Doreen G. Fernandez, *The Writer and His Milieu* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1984), 173.

On T.S. Eliot: "The Young T.S. Eliot and Alien Cultures: His Philippine Interactions," *Review of English Studies*, XLV:180 (1994), 523-25; Paul Stasi, "'The future holds more than the past has yielded': T.S. Eliot's Invention of Tradition and the St. Louis Exposition of 1904," *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 3:2 (2011), 1-18.

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