

The Ilustrados as Literary Critics: Philippine Literary Criticism under Spanish Rule

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“La frente hoy del filipino puede levantarse erguida: esta borrado el antiguo infamante de su incapacidad; el filipino es capaz, capaz de llegarse hasta el genio....Luna, Resurreccion Hidalgo y Pardo de Tavera han sido premiados en aquella Exposicion! Tres unicos artistas filipinos que se han atrevido a disputer un premio en este torneo de las ciencias, de las artes, letras, industria y comercio, entre una inmensa pleyade de pintores y escultores a cuales mas famosos.... el genio es patrimonio de todos y que la capacidad y el talento no es exclusivo de ciertas castas!”(Colome 2000, 46-47)¹

Thus, Graciano Lopez Jaena praised his compatriots, who won prizes in the Exposicion Universal de Paris, on the pages of *La Solidaridad* in July 1889. Lopez Jaena’s words predate the celebrated remark of the Francophone poet Aime

Cesaire published forty years later in Paris (1939): “...et aucune race ne possede le monopole de la beaute, de l’intelligence, de la force/ et il est place pour tous au rendez-vous de la conquete...”(and no race has the monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength/ and there is a room for everyone at the convocation of conquest)(Smith and Eshleman 1983, 76-77). While the latter has become part of the post-colonial canon, the former’s statement has remained obscure and ignored by most cultural critics in the Philippines.

This remark from a member of the ilustrado class is revealing. For it does not only provide an insight into Lopez Jaena’s consciousness, but also uncovers a germ of the ilustrados’ view of culture, an important starting point for any history of the development of Philippine Literary Criticism during the late 19th century.

This paper argues that the ilustrados contributed pioneering ideas in Literary Criticism, understood here as the practice of analyzing, evaluating, explaining, or refuting a work of art and its previous interpretations in the context of various social relations in a particular social space (country). Since Literary Criticism is a social act, it thus occurs in a specific field of cultural production which is under the relative domination of the field of power. The social nature of criticism and its relative autonomy transforms the cultural field into a sight of struggle among various factions, thereby producing contradictory literary pronouncements. This paper thus aims to analyze the nature of the literary criticism of the ilustrados through a study of the literary controversy which was ushered in by the contradictory evaluations of Rizal’s novels. This debate created two major camps- the ilustrados and the friars- which formulated two contradictory evaluations. Of course, the ilustrados also differed among themselves in their comparisons of the *Noli* and the *Fili*, thus establishing a question that still haunts modern critics. Moreover, this paper also tries to clarify the process of canonization of Rizal and

his works through an analysis of the combined efforts of the holders of political power and the holders of cultural power during the US colonial regime.

In *Rules of Art* (1996), Pierre Bourdieu formulates the concept of field to avoid the structuralist dilemma of dissolving agency in artistic production. A field is “a space of objective relations” where agents move with relative autonomy from the forces of political and economic power and yet to a certain extent is dominated by the latter (181). He thus differentiates a field of power and a field of cultural production. The former refers to the space where the agents of political and economic power move. The latter refers to the space where the artists, musicians, writers etc produce art and struggle for autonomy. It may also be divided into subfields like the field of art production, literary production etc with varying degrees of autonomy. Between the two fields, the field of power is dominant and hovers over the field of cultural production which is subordinate and yet continues to affirm its autonomy. Both these fields are contained in the wider social space which is often national in scope (124).

These concepts are used in this paper to illuminate the positions taken by the ilustrados in the social space of Spanish colonialism and the transformations of such space after the 1896 Revolution.

The Cultural Field of the Ilustrados

According to Nick Joaquin, the first grand celebration of the ilustrados was held in Madrid in 1884. Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo had just won the gold and silver medals respectively in the National Exposition of Fine Arts. This victory was the first salvo of the rising middle classes of the colony. “ This was glory indeed for the Philippine colony in Spain so long an obscure nonentity overshadowed by the