

The Pastoral Theme in Colonial Politics and Literature

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I'm going to talk about a theme that runs throughout the production and orchestration of colonial politics and literature in the Philippines, the pastoral theme. It's a broad theoretical consideration, whose historical and literary examples can tell us something about Philippine culture and society in the period I research, from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth. When I say "Philippine culture and society in the colonial period," I'm mindful of a rather polemical statement made by Teodoro Agoncillo many years ago, when the great nationalist historian declared that no such thing as a Filipino history could be said to exist before 1872: "When one examines critically the texture and substance of our history under imperialist Spain one wonders, really, whether the Philippines had a history prior to 1872 or thereabouts. For what has been regarded as Philippine history before 1872 is not Philippine, but Spanish."¹ My intention is not to quibble with Agoncillo, but rather complicate the general complex of ideas about Philippine history and culture that this statement emblematises. Like the invisible portrait that hangs between the audience and the damned characters of Nick Joaquin's "Portrait of the Artist as a Filipino," the identifying cipher, the shibboleth that distinguishes what is "Filipino" from what is "Spanish" – or for that matter, the distinction between what is "pre-colonial," "colonial," and "post-colonial," or the distinction between what is "pre-modern" and what is "modern"; or again, the distinction between what is "indigenous" and what is "Western" – continues to organize knowledge about Philippine history and culture in a decisive way. The pastoral theme gives us an opportunity to draw a transversal, a

line of flight, across these categories, so as to better illustrate how the 1896 revolution as an event belongs to a history deeply implicated in the larger intersections between our understandings of colonialism and modernity throughout the world between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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So, what is the pastoral theme? On the one hand, it refers to a theme in lyric poetry (both secular and religious) that hearkens to the Classical age, and possibly even further back. Raymond Williams locates its beginnings with Hesiod, although it is only in the third century B.C. that it becomes a recognized literary form.² This literary form foregrounds the life and customs of the countryside, oftentimes in direct opposition to the ways of the city, as well as the threats of war and civil disturbance. Central to this opposition, particularly in the Eclogues of Virgil, is the idealization of country life as the remains of a lost Arcadia, or Golden Age, that is opposed to the current social order and stands as its critique. In Spanish Golden Age poetry, the Eclogues of poet Garcilaso de la Vega closely tied this idealization of country life with both the passing of the feudal order under the monarchy of Charles V. In Tagalog poetry, this theme finds its way into a very significant example that I discuss below: the introduction to Francisco Balagtas' famous awit, *Ang Pinagdaanang Buhay ni Florante at ni Laura sa Kahariang Albania* (1838).³

Moreover, from the outset one can see how closely this first pastoral theme, can be related, and has been related, to the Garden of Eden from the book of Genesis. This theme, which passes into Christianity as a Paradise Lost, only to be regained after the Apocalypse, brings us to the second pastoral theme in colonial literature and politics, which concerns the political theology of government in the long interim between Christ's first and second comings. While John's book of Revelations identifies Christ as the *agnus dei*, lamb of God, it is only later that Christ appears under the