

A General's Lament: Quiet Fury and Deep Regret in Emilio Aguinaldo's Postwar Poetics about the Filipino Nation, Heroes and Memory-making

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Two type-written texts with handwritten corrections made and signed by Emilio Aguinaldo were recently discovered in the Archives of Eulogio Balan Rodriguez, the Director of the National Library during the Philippine Commonwealth and immediate post-war periods. These hitherto unseen letters reveal quite a rare emotional dimension to Emilio Aguinaldo's persona.

The first text, dated 23 January 1948, is a letter to the heads of the various departments (or chapters) of the *Asosación de los Veteranos de la Revolución Filipina*. It follows an earlier circular that Aguinaldo distributed to them concerning the proposed construction of a "Monument to the Philippines in Alapan, Imus, Cavite" which aims to refresh people's memory about the great difficulty and suffering endured by "our comrades who fell during the darkness of the night, upon which I will now seek to elucidate." This phrase indicates Aguinaldo's careful decision in his writing to reconnect with the nation's past by using the language of Filipino resistance against colonial rule. "*Dilim*" (darkness) and "*liwanag*" (light) are metaphors for colonial servitude and freedom, respectively. However, veterans of the Philippine Revolution would be able to see beyond the poetics of the classical literary

device. Their shared experience of the Revolution would enable them to immediately read in the very juxtaposition of these two contrasting qualities, as clear as night and day, the operational code for “a call to arms” given to them by their Commander-in-Chief. In a most clever manner, Aguinaldo in this singular act of writing fused the poetics and politics of the creation of the nation and collective memory.

After setting the most important context of his undertaking, Aguinaldo proceeds to describe the proposed design of the Monument:

...that, the flag will be carried on one hand by a Filipina revolutionary. On the other hand, she will carry a broken mace. This will stand on three mountains that are connected to each other, symbolizing Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao... upon which eight pillars in the form of bamboo torches each bearing three stars made of embossed concrete and brass shall form a line, which in turn will rest upon a semi-circle or crescent-shaped platform. Fronting the platform, a staircase of about two feet will be constructed. Three more sets of staircases will be constructed on each side of this platform, which may be used by the people to ascend the said monument. (Translation from Tagalog, mine)

Aguinaldo’s detour towards structural aesthetics serves to revive the memory of the revolution in the minds of the members of the association. The proposed monument does not depict an actual revolutionary. Instead, a female figure, perhaps channeling the image of the motherland or *Inang Bayan*, represents all who revolted against Spain. The three mountains, representing Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, evoke the territorial domain, the geo-body of Filipinas, while the eight torch-pillars recall the first flames that lit the revolution which eventually spread throughout the land.

Aguinaldo’s enthusiasm in sharing the details of the proposed design for the monument is best understood and contextualized by the rarity of such structures. Whereas monuments to Jose P. Rizal taking a myriad of forms were built during the Commonwealth Period across the archipelago,

the Filipino Revolution as a collective undertaking and as a most unique achievement in Asian nationalism was not memorialized officially, and quite understandably, by the American colonial regime. The distance over time between 1898 and 1948 is 50 years. In that span of time, nearly two and a half generations of Filipinos have already contracted a virulent strain political amnesia that rendered unseen and unheard its past achievements in path-breaking self-determination and enlightened nationalism. It seems that a new darkness has cloaked itself over Filipinas. In Aguinaldo's mind, only the light (*liwanag*) of memory in the form of a monument to those who fell for the Revolution and the First Philippine Republic can serve as an antidote to this socio-political malady. It is hoped that the construction of this Monument during the immediate post-war era will lift the veil of ignorance and forgetfulness imposed by a supposedly non-extant colonial regime, the self-described *exceptional* and *benevolent* external force of the United States of America.

In his next paragraph, Aguinaldo overtly deploys the collegial “we” in his appeal for close cooperation in managing the events that relate to the preparations for the Anniversary of the Alapan-Imus Siege. This strategy consists partly of *noblesse oblige* in the sensibilities of language use which requires a social superior or an exemplary center—such as that of constitutional monarchs who reign magnificently, but never really rule—to symbolically yield a superior position through a fictive downward movement in the social hierarchy of speech. Aguinaldo's deployment of super-polite Tagalog forms and expressions approaches a certain degree of self-deprecation, imploring rather than cajoling or scolding, which implies the recognition of the value of collegiality in an oddly still-to-be-disassembled hierarchical colonial set-up. He, however, manages to briefly install himself in a position of absolute superiority by, perhaps intentionally, slipping to the usage of “I” when he refers to the sufferings that he did not wish to experience for himself in the company of potentially uncommitted individuals

If good fortune allows us to accomplish this great task as **we** had hoped for, where **I** see no partners in experiencing difficulties due to the lack of commitment to what **we** intended to do, as well as for the very reason that the grand parade that **we** have planned to do on Friday morning, that is on the 28th this coming month of May, will indeed be organizing a national celebration in its entire scale; **we** have also determined to do this event for the reason that it commemorates the failed attack of the Spanish troops on our army which was still in the process of assembling and organizing itself for the second phase of the rebellion; most fortunately the Philippine flag successfully repelled and saw victory over the Spanish forces in the fields of Alapan and Kawit, and given the significance of this piece of history, **I** can foresee that perhaps the lands of Alapan and Imus will be awed and shaken by the great number of our countrymen who are expected to participate in this event; and it is also not a far off probability for us to be visited by experts from the (national) government. (Translation and bold script, mine)

In his concluding paragraph, Aguinaldo showed a most distinct ability to maintain his style of literary cordiality even as he heroically suffers what can best be described as “sublime irritation” borne of a person whose patience is about to dissipate. It’s the sentiment of a person who carries very deep within his being a rumbling anger like that of a slowly approaching tempest, which, from the security of distance of time and space, murmurs almost imperceptibly yet surely proceeds towards its path of unleashing its most frightening force of destruction. He continues his most ardent prayer

And therefore, my dear chapter presidents and co-heroes of the revolution, I reiterate to you my request to please send at the soonest time possible to the President of the Alapan Chapter, our co-hero Felipe Orcullo, the contributions that you will gather for the proposed Monument to the Philippine Flag, or if it is much easier for you to re-post the said contributions here, to the Central Directory of the Veterans of the Revolution, which we will later send to Alapan. (Translation and bold script, mine)

In contemporary digital texts, this would have simply been expressed succinctly as “Send your money, now!!!”

Note that his language at this point comes as rather cold, if not purposefully distanced, a matter-of-fact presentation of possible solutions to the operational problems that accompany the logistics of establishing a monument to *la Revolución Filipina*. Simply put, “you can do it this way, or you could do it that way.” One feels that at any moment, the angry general will suddenly erupt like a volcano spewing words like pyroclastic material whose violence and destructiveness similarly result from a sudden collapse of restraint, akin to parallel forms of an unstable lava dome and an unsustainable practice of diplomatic-speak.

A visit to Alapan reveals that General Aguinaldo got his monument, albeit constructed at a much reduced scale. Its eight pillars as well as its proposed lofty height obviously did not materialize. Sadly, this monument to the Philippine Flag and Revolution bearing the icon of a “female revolutionary” could hardly be identified by ordinary Filipinos (read: non-historians). It appears that the *Asosación* has compromised with its budget. It also appears that Aguinaldo has failed in his cajoling, since our very own contemporary Filipino nation-state has failed in properly commemorating the heroism of the Revolution. Both observations parallel our equally sad state of being a “compromised” nation, “failed” by many political standards and even harshly tagged (unjustifiably, I believe) as “aborted” by some.

The second text dated 20 June 1948 is a speech delivered during the installation of a commemorative panel in the birthplace of General Gregorio del Pilar in Bulacan, Bulacan. The written text of the speech shows that after greeting the Knights of Plaridel, the chief organizers and the crowd of listeners who came to the event, Aguinaldo surprisingly deploys what appears to be the language of love to describe his relationship to the young general

“*Nagkaibigan nga kami, at minahal ko siyang mabuti...*”

“We have indeed come to love each other, and I adored him well...” (Translation mine)

What seems to be an overtly-affectionate description of one's relationship with a subordinate general who is known for his good looks and exploits with women may strike many readers as rather odd. The bundle of thoughts and implications that accompany this expression also jars against the strongman image of Aguinaldo. Some interpretation based on historical linguistics as well as literary poetics may be needed in order to banish thoughts of the existence an intimate relationship between Aguinaldo and Gregorio del Pilar.

First of all, contemporary readers must understand that the rules of writing in the Tagalog-based Filipino were not yet well-established at the time of writing. The peculiarity of Aguinaldo's Tagalog (read: Caviteño dialect of Tagalog) can be seen in his choice words, locution, and contractions such as in the use of "*subali*" instead of "*subalit*" (but or however), "*pagmamasakit*" instead of "*pagmamalasakanit*" (empathy). Therefore, the phrase "*nagkaibigan nga kami*" which can be initially construed as "we have indeed come to love each other" or even more interpretatively as "we have fallen in love with each other," may very well be a contraction of "*naging magkaibigan nga kami*" (we have indeed become friends). Secondly, the flowery poetics of speech-writing or the stylistics of the period may be deemed to be rather overly expressive compared to the present. References to a "beloved" or to acts of "loving each other" do not necessarily imply romantic involvement. Generally, at that earlier period in time, expressions of *cariño* were not limited to intimate partners. Thirdly, a less fascinating and perhaps more mundane explanation may be proffered. The "N" key lies next to the "M" key in the QWERTY board of the typewriter. Aguinaldo's typo-filled text hints at the great probability of the most common mistake of hitting the wrong key to have occurred. If so, "*nagkaibigan nga kami*" (we have indeed loved each other) may have been the unintended result of aiming for "*magkaibigan nga kami*" (we were indeed friends). At the time of writing, Aguinaldo would have been 79 years old. It would not be improbable for him to have simply made a typographical error... and whoa, what an error it indeed presents to artistic representation or imagery as well as to historical imagination!

Still, the verity of affection expressed in such tender and poignant language is beyond doubt. A study of context, however, reveals the persuasiveness of the non-romantic argument. Aguinaldo genuinely admired Del Pilar as a co-hero and comrade-in-arms. Historical records point to the fact that the two men were indeed quite close. Therefore, it is not unlikely for the two men to develop a physical and psychological closeness with a high degree of intensity characterized by a truly felt and expressed platonic love or admiration that approaches but is not exactly that of intimate or romantic affection. “Bromance” is the word used in contemporary times for this kind of affection. The “non-intimate” or the “non-romantic” quality of this “bromance” can be gleaned from the reasons Aguinaldo cites for his “affection” for Gregorio del Pilar

“...dahil sa nakilala ko na magaling ang kanyang pita at pagmamasakit, na mahango agad sa kaalipinan ng ating Inang Bayan.”

“...for the reason that I have come to know the strength of his purpose (in life) and his sacrifice for our motherland to be immediately freed from slavery.” (Translation mine)

The reasons enumerated above strongly suggests that genuine affection indeed developed between two comrades-in-arms whose shared aspirations for *kasarinlan* or national sovereignty forced both of them to navigate jointly the very precarious border between life and death. In a life of war, both knew the omnipresence of death which at any moment may come and must be embraced as the highest form of individual sacrifice to the idea of nation. Aguinaldo’s recollection of Del Pilar’s ultimate sacrifice for the life of his nation and, most poignantly, for his commanding officer that fateful day of 2 December 1899 in Tirad Pass is expectedly replete with deep and sorrowful regret

I wish to say that I truly believe to this very day that General Gregorio del Pilar should not have died at that time in Tirad Pass, and that both of us would still be alive up to this very present time,

had he not been the very first person to prohibit me strictly from joining him; for this was what caused his death, that gut feeling of ill-boding that he may be outflanked to his left and to his right, which I could have blocked, and thus only two hours after he left Lepanto, I could not contain my anxiety, for General del Pilar and I strongly believed, as we have both carefully studied the strength of the strategy of Tirad Pass, that it would not be breached by merely one or two battalions of American soldiers, (and thus), I quickly prepared to join General del Pilar.... (Translation mine)

General Gregorio del Pilar's 60 men, although strategically well-placed, eventually succumbed to the strength of more than 500 American soldiers. Was Tirad Pass defendable with more men? Could Aguinaldo have prevented the death of the young general? Alas, the past could not be re-lived. Aguinaldo had to follow del Pilar's firm insistence to live for a higher cause requiring, in that critical point in history, that Aguinaldo abandon his role and persona as close friend so that the role of the *Generalísimo* with the tactical if not cold decision-making skills could prevail for the sake of the nation

...However, I was further prevented from doing so by my high position (*estado mayor*) and my Family (*Familia*), for at the very end, if I were to die, then the revolution would have also died, and the motherland would never be freed from slavery.

As the *Generalísimo*, the supreme leader of the Revolution/Republic which he poetically evokes as Family with a capital "F," Aguinaldo could not have escaped from this most regretful decision.

The feelings of anxiety and momentary vacillation which he freely expresses in this speech, however, reveal a very human reaction to a desperate situation of absolute helplessness. The historical strongman has momentarily allowed us a rare glimpse into his vulnerable side. It comes as a darting gaze upon the object of his affection, a co-hero who at one crucial moment in time fell so that he may move forward, and died so that he and the Republic of their shared affections may live.

Given this lease of life, what does one do if one were Aguinaldo? Historical figures, especially those who belong to the side of the defeated, do not always have the luxury of re-inventing themselves. Given this situational challenge, Aguinaldo had to continue to be... Aguinaldo. As such, he continued to engage the Filipino nation through his writings and speeches... and yes, also even through his failed forays into electoral politics. One must remember that this nation, through the American strategies of official nationalism, had already largely turned its back on him during the immediate post-war period.

Reviled as the effective executioner of Andres Bonifacio, Aguinaldo's social capital as one of the founding fathers of the Filipino nation had already more or less dissipated at the time. With the decidedly unapologetic and brave face that he puts on whenever he needed to make a public appearance, Aguinaldo's presence serves as a mnemonic to that admittedly flawed yet trail-blazingly brave nation found in this unexpected corner of a brash and unforgiving world. In this period of decline towards political irrelevance, we can almost hear him cry out to God and to Filipinas.... "After so many battles won, so many near encounters with death, so many sacrifices of the body and the mind... they remember me for this one thing!"

Most fortunately, it appears that Aguinaldo was blessed with a steadfast mind, for he never stopped talking and writing about the nation of his memory and the nation of his mindful intent. He never doubted "his or his co-heroes" place in Filipino history. It has always been his flag that we raise; his national anthem that we unceasingly sing; and, it has always been, except during that relatively brief American interlude, his Republic that we look back to in order to commemorate our effective, affective, and/or aspirational "*kasarinlan*."

One lesson which we can glean from Aguinaldo's long life, which ended in 1964, is the need to reassess the way we collectively construct our iconography and poetics of the Filipino nation. Official narratives tend to portray the nation and its history via the discourse of heroic perfectionism. Following this essentially hagiographical approach to writing texts, the

nation which is often mentioned in the same breath as “God Almighty,” appears to emerge in perfect form from the mud and dregs of an *ancien regime* of oppression. In short, we often assume that the nation comes as it is in its present form; we also assume that heroes in order to be truly heroic must do little or no wrong; that our historical narratives are as perfectly arched and color-sequenced as rainbows. Alas, there is no such nation as it is always in a flux... in a state of constant re-invention, unceasingly giving birth to itself. As Aguinaldo’s life attests, there too is no such thing as a perfect hero. Nations are constituted by people... by flawed human beings who are prone to err; but can still have the capacity to be collectively great through the creation of a “shared consciousness,” through a “sense of belongingness” ...and, yes, through relentless “imagination.” Unlike human beings whose lives follow a natural biological cycle, nations through memory-making, (re)imagination, and (re)invention, do not easily die. The constant processes of creating the nation are therefore anathema to erroneous personification found in the conceptualization of “a nation aborted” or “a damaged culture,” for that matter. Such overconfident declaration of finality which conflates the life cycle of a living organism to that of political community, can only be the result of a lack of imagination, faith, hope, and love.

Aguinaldo’s embrace of his emotional persona affirms the idea of finding strength in the very human qualities of our heroes and historical figures. The acceptance of emotions gave Aguinaldo the ability to express two forms of lamentations. In the first text, Aguinaldo lamented the memory of the Revolution as the vital force that propelled the nation toward *kasarinlan*. His lament came in the form of quiet rage directed at his co-heroes whose actions in reclaiming the memory of the Revolution fell short of his expectation. This anger, albeit expressed in a quiet form, can best be understood in the context of inaction in a situation of great possibilities. The memory of the beginnings of a nation through the Revolution was and still is reclaimable. In the second text, in marked contrast, Aguinaldo’s lamentation came in the form of deep grief and unfathomable regret. He grieves the death of his closest friend whose company he will never ever

possess or enjoy in this earthly plane. He knows that this loss is absolute and this feeling of emptiness will haunt him for the rest of his life. Furthermore, Gregorio H. Del Pilar's ultimate sacrifice, one that he acceded to, is the very reason he continued to live. Could it not have been otherwise? This and many other unanswerable questions torment Aguinaldo throughout his life. Aguinaldo's grief and regret rests solely on his shoulders, and perhaps on destiny which gave him such a cruel deal. No amount of rage can correct this situation. One can only hope to be able to build a form of silent acceptance or willing resignation to remedy such situation. In the end, it appears that Aguinaldo has successfully submitted himself to dictates of fate. This peaceful submission to the fact of personal failures, mistakes, as well as to the unexplained and ambiguous aspects of his life, must have been present in his unrelentless and continued pursuit of his vision of the nation-of-intent. Perhaps, he owes his relentlessness to the Revolution, the Nation, and... to Gregorio H. Del Pilar. Most fortunately, in the realm of politics, defeat only follows upon the finality of its declared concession. Why indeed are we still here, even *después de más de cien años de muchos errores sin igual* (after over a hundred years of numerous, incomparable errors)?

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