

ON THE POET'S CRAFT OR SULLEN ART

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I

It is quite telling that we now refer to literary works as simply “texts” or, redundantly, “cultural texts.” Admittedly, when one reads and interprets, one’s understanding of the text already implies a *theoria*, a Greek word which means “a way of looking”; to regard a text “a literary work” assumes some idea of “literariness” or of “literature” as work of art. Yet, by and large, Theory as an academic establishment—that is to say, all its various schools and movements, such as “cultural studies,” deconstruction, feminist theory and criticism, Marxism, postcolonial theory and criticism, race and ethnicity studies, etc.—more potently predetermines now our reading of any “text”; indeed, one’s reading is at times privileged over the “text” itself, just as though we only had a “pre-text” as the ground for what could pass as a valid enough reading from some theoretical perspective or predilection. For the “text” always seems, exhilaratingly, other—not quite what one reads, attending closely to the play of the text itself, but what it pleases one to make of it. It can therefore be almost any thing one wills, according to the theory one prefers, and depending only on one’s sophistication and cleverness, not to speak of bias or some program of advocacy. But might not the text read itself over? That is to say, has it not come definitely to terms with itself?

Of course, we are not about to deny that Theory has opened up new fields of inquiry which have yielded valuable insights into our human condition. And with *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (2005) coming after *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), we are assured that Theory is self-aware—aware of its own premises and wary of blindness and excess. Still, Theory—or rather, its more contentious side—has, it seems to me, eroded in academe the pleasure that we take in reading poetry. It might also have

degraded our sense of a poem's worth as poem. In Horace's critical dictum, *dulce et utile*, "delightful and instructive," I should think that *utile* refers to the literary work's *content*, which is the matter of interpretation, and *dulce* to the *form* that has been wrought, which is the matter of art. I assume that the analysis or critical appreciation of the form is that which must direct and validate the interpretation; and only then might a critique, from some theoretical standpoint (say, a feminist perspective), be brought to bear on the poem's or story's subject as interpreted. For what is lacking in many theory-driven readings is the aesthetic sense; often, they are in the main only interpretations of textual *content*, in light of a given theory, without much regard for *form*, which is the matter of art (the aesthetic dimension of the work). Hardly is there any evaluation of the artistic worth of the literary work. To my mind, at the heart of literary studies is a critical insistence on high standards in literary works so that what is needed first is not more eisegesis but more poetics: that is, a wider critical inquiry into, and more vigorous exchange of views about, the intrinsic worth of various forms of the imagination, no matter how thorny that field of interrogation.

This is really the chief point that I wish to make. We must restore to our reading of the poem's text the performance of the text itself precisely by attending first to its form. For writers when they write do not adhere to any fixed criteria or theory of the literary work; indeed, for the writer, *poem* or *short story* is only a convenient label. The writer aspires to creating something unique in his playing field which is the field of imagination; he makes things anew or he makes new things. He creates a thing, an object of art. He creates forms of the imagination. To adopt what the poet Laurie Sheck says in *The Poet's Notebook*, the poem is "a place made of words"—an inscape of "psychological and spiritual texture" (qtd. in Arrien 26).

The concept of form is the unavoidable crux, never once and for all resolved, because the imagination has infinite possibilities; but it is the very Minotaur that the writer grapples with in every creative act. If one should insist on some idea of *form*, I could perhaps offer Wallace Stevens' idea of what he calls the "nobility" of the imagination as its "peculiarity," thus:

Nothing could be more evasive and inaccessible. Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more quickly. There is a shame of disclosing it and in its definite presentations a horror of it. But there it is. The fact that it is there is what makes it possible to invite to the reading

and writing of poetry men of intelligence and desire for life. I am not thinking of the ethical or the sonorous or at all of the manner of it. The manner of it is, in fact, its difficulty, which each man must feel each day differently, for himself. I am not thinking of the solemn, the portentous or demoded. On the other hand, I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me show it to you unfixd. (*Necessary Angel* 34)¹

Or I might call to mind Stevens' poem, "Anecdote of the Jar," which one could regard as a parable on form in the realm of art and its power in our workaday world:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee. (*Collected Poems* 76)

I think it is best, therefore, to regard now what the writers themselves do and say about their "craft or sullen art." They know firsthand what the difficulties of writing are. The literary work is, before anything else, *work*—work of language and work of imagination, both; in short, a work of art.

All writings deal with human experience and are limited by it, for we can observe and apprehend only as human beings. The "literary work" is no exception, but what distinguishes it is the singular fact that it seeks to fashion, feign, or mimic an individual experience, to relive it, to give its representation a human face. That imaginative fashioning or feigning is what used to be called *mimesis*, by which is meant not a copy or imitation but rather, as the

classical scholar, Whitney J. Oates, points out, the creative process by which a “form comes to be imposed upon the artist’s material” (xxiii)²: that material, as regards literature, is a given natural language and whatever elements of a human experience that language could convey or evoke—such elements as action, thought, emotion, and a variety of situations and circumstances; and the form that comes to be imposed upon that raw material is that of an imagined human experience, be that only, as in most lyric poems, someone’s emotional outcry or train of reflection.

To speak of the creative process heuristically, one might suppose that, in regard to the lyric poem, the writer imagines a moment that is lived, and then works the language to impose on that medium a form by which the meaningfulness of the imagined is achieved. The form is that moment as imagined as lived, and its meaningfulness is that by which we are moved. I say not any fixed meaning but meaningfulness, “which each man must feel each day differently, for himself.” The act of reading a literary work as work of art is, before anything else, an act of contemplation: work too of imagination that pays heed to, and hews closely to, the play of the text as work of language. Albert Camus so well puts it: “When the imagination sleeps, words are emptied of their meaning” (“Albert Camus”).³

I have often wondered why Dylan Thomas should speak of his art as “sullen”; perhaps, it is because people do not heed the poet’s craft, where the form is *the living of it as imagined*, and the craft or art is the working of a given natural language by which the form is achieved. That cultivation of one’s medium may well be what Albert Camus has in mind when he speaks of style as “the simultaneous existence of reality and of the mind that gives reality its form” (Camus 271).⁴ I believe that the study of forms of the imagination is at the heart of literary studies.

Here is Dylan Thomas’ poet’s manifesto in 1952:

In my craft or sullen art
 Exercised in the still night
 When only the moon rages
 And the lovers lie abed
 With all their griefs in their arms,
 I labour by singing light
 Not for ambition or bread
 Or the strut and trade of charms

On the ivory stages,
 But for the common wages
 Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
 From the raging moon I write
 On these spindrift pages,
 Nor for the towering dead
 With their nightingales and psalms,
 But for the lovers, their arms
 Round the griefs of the ages
 Who pay no praise or wages
 Nor heed my craft or art. (196-97)

The writer writes in solitude for lovers, with all their griefs in their arms, which are also the griefs of the ages: as to say, at the root of all literature lies our sense of mortality; he writes, not for ambition or bread, or to indulge the self, or show off on the world's stage; he writes only for the common wages of our most secret heart, as to say, he gives us back our desire for life which is the supreme good, though we may not praise him for his solitary labor by singing light, nor pay any heed to his art by which he has moved us.

The poet's subject may be purely his own subjectivity, but if we are moved by the verbal object that he has fashioned, it is because he has given us back a sense of our own humanity. Not for the proud man, nor for the towering dead, does he write on spindrift pages—spray and wind and sand, for the poet's words are always falling away from us, and we only glimpse a revelation that deepens our sense of the fullness of living amid the griefs of the ages. He writes for the lovers, they who have the deepest hunger for life and the profoundest sense of mortality. He writes for men and women "of intelligence and desire for life"; he gives us back *the living of it*—the sensation of living, the sense of being wholly alive, body and mind and soul, whether soul be only superstition or suspicion.

The *living of it* may be something like this: on the one hand, the material world, including people of course; on the other, language. Now, because the human being alone is conscious of death, he alone has a great yearning for this world. He longs for the world to be the word incarnate. This is to *translate*: a word from Latin which means "to ferry across"; one longs to carry the world over to language. Any language by itself is already such translation; hence, language

is essentially fictive, but the world being unconscious resists the translation. The creative writer is he who overcomes the resistance almost successfully.

Creative writing then is essentially translation: we ferry across our words, be they indigenous or adopted, those thoughts and feelings which have not till then found their expression, or which need again to be expressed in a new form. What is expressed, through words and the images or myths that they are made to evoke, is an insight into our humanity: an illumination of thought which no idea conveys or a radiance of feeling which no thought catches. If this is so, then language is our first fiction, able to transcend itself by its evocative power; and its working—its being wrought into poem or story—a second fiction, by which our humanity is again created.

Here is another poem by Cirilo F. Bautista, “Addressed to Himself,” 1968:

How hard I have made life for you, Cirilo,
Who wrestle with words to free my mind;
Your various battles, you do not know,

Poise at me the same buckle, the same wind
That eagles in anger hotly ride on.
Yet like buckles you never break, though blind

At times you pine and pine for beauty gone—
Ah, never take the same courage, *mon ami*,
Wisdom and the past are never one.

But learn to distrust language that we
In constant dreams deem the only fact,
Kill it in seduction or heraldry

So eagle-like you may invent your act;
Then think you walk in a world of thrall,
Where Beauty walks too but does not look back,

Crossing the foggy fjords of the skull.
(Bautista 9; Abad *Native Clearing* 448-449)

Cirilo speaks of killing the language, as to say: wrest from any given historical language its words, grammar, and syntax in order to express what language covers over with its silences. As the poet Yves Bonnefoy puts it, the

poetic sense “opens up the intuition to all that language refuses” (163). One may be language-bound, culture-bound; it is the poetic sense that liberates. For the poet reinvents his medium. He must *find his own language again, within*: within the language itself, for any language is already a way of perceiving reality, as also within oneself, that is, how, before words or speech, one thinks and feels. That, in essence, is for me *creative writing*. The play with language, or the text's own performance, has mainly to do with the essentially fictive nature of language itself.⁵

Most of our ideas may be commonplace, and we may be hardly aware how our lives are governed by them. Poetry too may deal with such commonplaces but when it does, the force of their poetry, which was once their power to move, is recovered. This is why the poet must relentlessly carve his own clearing from their common usage in his tongue; he must find his own way with language, break a trail through its murmurous woods, deliver again those commonplaces as from an infertile womb. He reinvents their clime in the poem's haven where they breathe anew.

The poet aspires to beauty, pines for it—beauty always gone, for such is the fact of mortality—and so he makes new things or creates forms anew, never taking the same path through language's fastness because “wisdom and the past are never one.” As I said earlier, language itself is fictive, and a crucial part of the poem's texture is what John Hollander calls “the turns and twists of sense and reference” (1). In this way, the poet might invent his act in a new clearing of language—“a world of thrall,” a place made of words—where he might catch a glimpse of Beauty “crossing the foggy fjords of the skull.”

Literature of course is dynamic; it evolves and changes all the time. What we traditionally call story, poem, novel, or play are only possible forms of the language, whatever language we cultivate. If so, then they also secrete, poem to poem, the rules and criteria of their possibility. The writer is always in quest of other possible forms.

As forms of the language at play, short story or poem enact what we are as human beings—what, in our individual and in our common history, we have become and may be becoming. As symbolic enactment, they are reinventions of the imagination, for we create the meanings that help us live.

Such is my perspective on literature and creative writing, and in that light, I believe that our writers deserve a more serious consideration of their “craft or sullen art” by which certain forms of language are enabled to transcend

the limits and voids in language. Indeed, I think of Philippine literature as an archipelago of letters because we have many languages, including English. Our English is already our own, nothing less than a national language.

II

Allow me to illustrate the matter of form with a reading of two poems by Edith L. Tiempo: “Lament for the Littlest Fellow” (1950), and “Bonsai” (1972).

Lament for the Littlest Fellow

The littlest fellow was a marmoset.
 He held the bars and blinked his old man's eyes.
 You said he knew us and took my arm and set
 My fingers around the bars, with coaxing mimicries
 Of squeak and twitter. “Now he thinks you are
 Another marmoset in a cage.” A proud denial
 Set you to laughing, shutting back a question far
 Into my mind, something enormous and final.
 The question was unasked but there is an answer.
 Sometimes in your sleeping face upon the pillow,
 I would catch our own little truant unaware;
 He had fled from our pain and the dark room of our rage,
 But I would snatch him back from yesterday and tomorrow.
 You wake, and I bruise my hands on the living cage.
 (Tiempo 186; Abad *Native Clearing* 73)

Bonsai

All that I love
 I fold over once
 And once again
 To keep in a box
 Or a slit in a hollow post
 Or in my shoe.

All that I love?
 Why, yes, but for the moment—
 And for all time, both.
 Something that folds and keeps easy,
 Son's note or Dad's one gaudy tie,

A roto picture of a young queen,
 A blue Indian shawl, even
 A money bill.

It's utter sublimation,
 A feat, this heart's control,
 Moment to moment,
 To scale all love down
 To a cupped hand's size,

Till seashells are broken pieces
 From God's own bright teeth,
 And life and love are real
 Things you can run and
 Breathless hand over
 To the merest child.
 (Tiempo 202-203; Abad *Native Clearing* 75-76)

The first poem, "Lament," takes the format of a sonnet with its own metrical scheme. What the question is, and what exactly the answer to it—both "something enormous and final"—suggest the poem's inner form, the meaningfulness of the human experience that the poem has simulated; we would have to infer both question and answer from the imagery and metaphor and the human situation that they subtly limn. The sole metaphor is of course the marmoset in the cage, a monkey whose name etymologically points to a "grotesque mumbling figure." We should pay close attention to how the woman (say) perceives the animal with whom, when her husband (say) mocks it, she proudly denies any resemblance. "The littlest fellow," so the poem begins, the word "fellow" at once marking the animal as human and so, fixing the resemblance, since it is apparently the woman's perception that is narrated or recalled by herself; the man taunts the woman and sets her fingers around the bars of the marmoset's cage, as to mimic a prison cell for her and so enforce the resemblance that she denies. All male banter or monkey business, if you will, but it provokes in the woman, the poem's speaker or narrator, a realization that is immediately suppressed because it is "something enormous and final." For nights afterwards, when the woman catches the image (the marmoset) in her husband's sleeping face, she calls it "our own little truant." For that moment of truancy and banter at the zoo stayed with her, but since at the time she had repressed a dark realization, the image (marmoset) "had fled from

our pain and the dark room of our rage” (where bedroom of course as site of intimacy becomes a variation upon cage). Yet she “would snatch him back,” the marmoset, “from yesterday and tomorrow,” because the image held the truth. “You wake, and I bruise my hands on the living cage.”⁶ At the poem’s end, we might ask, “Why *lament for?*—is it because the truth is constantly denied so that its enormity (“the living cage”) might be lightened?”

But lightened it is indeed in a later poem, a later moment of enlightenment, where the image (of the poem’s insight or meaningfulness) appears only in the poem’s title, “Bonsai.” Here the poem is, as it were, a free form because that moment, where all love is gathered, is “all time.” In fact, it isn’t so much image (bonsai) as idea and feeling which the poem’s words enforce, and so, achieve the form by which we are moved. Box or slit in a hollow post or shoe—it isn’t the image (like the marmoset’s cage) which motivates the poem, that is, its play with language; rather, what generates that play is the idea of souvenir or memento by which one cherishes and nurtures “life and love [as] real”—as real as any material memento like “a blue Indian shawl.” This calls to mind Eduardo Galeano’s beautiful epigraph to his *Book of Embraces* (1989): “*Recordar*: To remember; from the Latin *re-cordis*, to pass through the heart.” Be it only “son’s note or Dad’s one gaudy tie,” or even the most ordinary of things, like “a money bill”—the revelation about such souvenirs *is* the poem’s inner form, and it would be the highest art to state it quite simply, without that rhetoric of irony, paradox, and ambiguity so cherished in the New Critical mode of Cleanth Brooks et al:

It’s utter sublimation,
A feat, this heart’s control
Moment to moment
To scale all love down
To a cupped hand’s size,

Yet, the irony and paradox are there, in the very aptness of the words “scale” and “cupped hand,” so carefully chosen that “life and love” as “real things” appear all the more magnificent.

“Till seashells are broken pieces,” says the poet, “from God’s own bright teeth.” This, for me, is the most remarkable feat in the poem’s making—the text’s own performance. It is, the poet says, “for the moment— / And for all time, both”—this keeping of mementos, this folding over and scaling down

to keep easy and cherish. So then, "Till seashells . . ." encompasses all time and, by invoking God, suggests a divinity in that simple yet mysterious affection which sustains life and love as real. The image of seashells glinting on a sunny beach evokes brightness and laughter, and so fulfills what the poet speaks of as "heart's control." But there is more: seashells are broken pieces like souvenirs. They are broken off, as it were, from those happy moments where "life and love are real"; then indeed, for they are deeply cherished, they are as things that are very light so that "you can run and / Breathless hand [them] over / To the merest child." And *that* truly is the very sign that it is real, for a child needs no further proof of love than love.

III

To speak of poetry as "cultural text" is to regard my country's poetry as "our native clearing" within the language that has been adopted for artistic *mimesis*.

I am aware that a poem's subject, before any possible reading of it, may well be the poet's own subjectivity, and well aware too of what Milan Kundera calls "big-nation" and "small-nation provincialism" (37). Yet, what is Philippine or Filipino in our literature is not so much a matter of *what* one reads, say, particular items of reality, local color and other markers, but so much more a matter of *how*: basically, then, a practice of reading, a way of seeing when one interprets the text on its face, as it were, and relates it to his own historical and cultural scene. "Here," says the poet Fernando M. Maramág, "East and West . . . have dimmed this scene so fair" (127; *Abad Man of Earth* 32).

If one's country is how one imagines her, it follows that in our literature, our sense of country is essentially a *poetic sense*, for it is work of imagination in and through language *upon our own ground*. The literary text, simply because it is language purposefully worked, may be the clearest expression of our sense of our day-to-day living in the very element of our history and culture. In that light, a poet's sense for language—whatever language he has mastered—may be his most intimate sense of his country's landscape and his people's lived lives. By the same light, if reading—like writing—is finding your way through language, then the same poetic sense enables one to transcend the matter of language: that is, the matter of the individual words, the thoughts and feelings they would signify, the images they would evoke. *To transcend*: that is to say, beneath all that we read in our literature, in whatever language, is a sense of our country—a sense of our people's story yearning for form. Our people's

story is our common history and culture, ever unfolding, and that yearning for form is an aspiration for wholeness or meaningfulness as a community for all our differences across the archipelago.

Consider the following poems:

Palms

A multitude
Of upraised arms
Shadowed black against the sky:

Soul of my country,
Lifting its cry.

River-Winds

In the evening
The river-winds take the village
In their arms,
Whispering fragments of old lost songs;
And, pulling a blanket of dreams
Over the sleeping roofs,
Softly, softly move on ...

Love-Hate

I hate her, yet love her too. How is that, you may ask.
I don't know, but that's how I feel—and how it hurts!

Like the Grasses

My love
Is like the grasses
Hidden in the deep mountain:
Though its abundance increases,
There is none that knows.
Soothsayer

What could he know of sky and stars, or heaven's all-hidden life,
Who did not see his own house and the scoundrel that kissed his
wife?

After Two Months in Prison

Now I know the bitter tears,
 The dull despair, the frantic rages,
 The sleep-destroying hopes and fears
 Of fish in bowls and birds in cages.

To read is first to interpret the text on its face, to deal with it on and by its own terms. Such close reading, attending carefully to the form of the literary text as work of art, is the perfect antidote to the text's predestination, that is, the privileging of Theory over text such that the text is read to conform to the theory that one prefers. It simply isn't good critical practice to run a text at once through a gauntlet of vociferous Isms—Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, postcolonial eisegesis, etc. Theory kills the text when it imposes itself on it rather than serving only to illuminate some aspect of it; always, only some aspect of it, for there is no single theory of *all of the text*. Neither will the text be bound as to its nature or its insight by any theory; only if the *theoria* or way of looking respects the text's formal integrity will the poem or story, to adopt a few verses from John Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning", "endure not yet/ A breach, but an expansion,/ Like gold to airy thinness beat."

The critic can always make of the text whatever he wills of it—a Marxist or feminist reading, a deconstructive essay, a postcolonial eisegesis, etc.—at times, indeed, a superfetation of an aspect or feature of the text that the critic leeches to serve a theoretical standpoint. But the text itself, without benefit of Theory, isn't mute. There a human action is feigned or depicted, and it is already meaningful, be it only a mood or sense impression, a stance or attitude, a meditation. That meaningfulness is its moral or ethical dimension. And that moral dimension raises it to a universal plane. The universal plane is not the realm of eternal verities; it is the site of everlasting questioning.⁷ Note how, to the very present, classical Greek tragedy, even in translation, is relevant.

For both poet and reader (where poet is a figure for all artists of the word), the chief appeal of the literary text is to the imagination. The primary requirement then is what we have called *a sense for language*. And the test is how we interpret as we read. It is that which creates our sense of country. How did you read all those poems from "Palms" to "After Two Months in Prison"? We cannot deal with the question, "What is Filipino?" in the abstract; it isn't a pure and unique essence. Indeed, most texts—among them, of course, are the great

works of literature—exist on the universal plane where the imagination is most free. On that plane, as we read, we grasp a sense of our common humanity: what it is to be human, “Its Gold and its wars,” says Jose Garcia Villa.⁸ It doesn’t contradict that sense of our humanity to derive from the same texts a sense of our country, the Filipino in his own “scene so fair.” Most readers in fact interpret the literary text on the universal plane; they would hardly ask, “What is Filipino in this poem?” in much the same way that no American reader would first ask of the text, “What is American here?”

Now I can tell you: “Palms” is a poem by Aurelio S. Alvero. An Indonesian reader or a Cuban would, though perhaps unconsciously, grasp in and through it a sense of his own country because he brings to the poem, also unconsciously, a sense of his own physical surroundings; but more importantly, because he can immediately recognize in the poem, and in himself too, the accession of patriotic fire. The same observation about the meaningfulness we create as we read will apply to “River-Winds” by Conrado V. Pedroche (perhaps inspired by Carl Sandburg’s “Fog”); “Love-Hate” by the Roman poet Catullus (in one possible translation into English); “Like the Grasses” by the Japanese poet Ono No Yoshiki; “Soothsayer” from the Persian *Gulistan* (*The Rose Garden*); and “After Two Months in Prison” by Horacio de la Costa, S.J.⁹

We cannot help being ourselves, Filipinos, in much the same way that the Filipino in America, after many years there, cannot help being American.

I listened to him speak
of West Virginia
(he was born in Leyte
but was living
in West Virginia).
He spoke as they do
in the movies,
and as Ronald Reagan does
on the radio.
Even the way
he said “Virginia”
was better than the way
Hinying, a girl I knew
whose hair fell down a shoulder
like the tail of a bird,
said her name,

which was "Virhinia."
 And on that warm evening
 I told myself,
 That's where I want to be,
 in West Virginia, or New York,
 or San Francisco,
 because cousin says
 everything there is big
 and cheap—big chickens,
 big eggs, big buildings,
 And big flowers?
 Cousin looked at me
 and said, Yes, big roses,
 tea roses, and he was
 about to name other roses
 but the moon was rising
 and it was bigger than in
 America.

It cannot be helped that we bring to the poem we read what knowledge and experience we have; nor is it wrong, for so long as we respect the poem's text that requires, before all else, a sense for language. If we happen to know that the poet is Filipino—as is the case with the poem above called "America" by Simeon Dumdum (206-7)—then our reading may well be further informed by general knowledge of our history and culture and personal reflection on our present circumstances: what we have ourselves personally lived through, what we imagine we have become as a people through our history, what we think as a people we aspire to. *We*: that is to say, from reader to reader, each one, if he is so inclined, *imagining* his community and assuming that its members share a history and culture. This may be an illusion, but each one, for himself and for the moment, makes it real. Our sense of country is, in the first place, personal and subjective, but that doesn't make it any less real. It may also be shared, through education, mass media, literature and the other arts, and other means and institutions. One does not of course always read as though he were looking for his country; he does so only if he is so inclined; which is why I say that the Philippine matter in and through what I read is a practice of reading.

One's sense of country is more image than concept, more feeling than thought—which of course is why that sense is more readily apprehensible in

the artistic media: painting, film, theatre, song, the literary text, etc. If one immigrates, he brings with him that sense of country; but because it is a sense borne out of living among people in a natural terrain that has a people's own culture and history, it is over time and generations as elastic and mutable as a people's history and culture. The "Filipino American" is over time not Filipino, he is American; that is his own choice. After an indeterminate period, he thinks and feels American, he *lives* American. "America" becomes what his imagination owes its allegiance to; if his mind or heart should at times turn to his country of origin, it is a passing nostalgia, a transient ache for a home that was once his heart's country. If he returns and settles in his country of origin, or returns to die and be buried there, it can be said that he has never really in his heart relinquished his imagination's allegiance to his country of origin, he has never really gone away, he has always nurtured in his heart his sense of his original country.

The Filipino then is what my imagination owes its allegiance to.

Notes

1. To which I might add a remark by Nicholas Harrison: "Literature may be what [Jacques] Derrida has in mind when he says 'there are perhaps forms of thought that think more than does that thought called philosophy'" (149).

I might also append here what Francisco Arcellana says in his Introduction to Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr.'s first collection of stories, *Oldtimer*: the stories, he says, "are remarkable for their achieved form. Mark Schorer defines form as achieved content." The "honest artist," Arcellana goes on to say, always "knows when form has been achieved ... That is absolute. A feeling for form. Let me elaborate with a paraphrase. All writing aspires to the condition of poetry. Poetry is a matter of form. A poem is a poem because of its form—the poem is in the form of the poem; what the poem is saying is in how it is saying it" (ix).

Dalisay, in the Preface to his *Selected Stories*, says: "on the page," where the story is, "is the life that matters" (x). That life is achieved by the story's form.

2. Two quotes from Albert Camus that I picked up from his *Wikiquote* page stress my point: "Every great work makes the human face more admirable and richer, and this is its whole secret." / "If the world were clear, art would not exist." See also, if you will, Halliwell.

3. I came fortuitously upon this quote only much later on in the course of my research as I sought my source in Camus for his remark on style.

4. He says further: "A work in which the content overflows the form, or in which the form drowns the content, only bespeaks an unconvinced and unconvincing unity. In this domain, as in others, any unity that is not a unity of style is a mutilation."

5. A "fiction" is a *poiesis*—a making. It comes from Latin *factio*, the act of fashioning, which in turn is from *fictus, fingere*: to shape, fashion, or feign. Thus, in English, we think of fiction as "something invented by the imagination or feigned" (Webster).

6. Is the poem perhaps an echo of—albeit unconsciously and of larger implication—Angela Manalang Gloria's "Revolt from Hymen," 1940? See Abad *Man of Earth* 68.

7. It is well worth quoting Stanley Kunitz's idea of what is "moral" for the poet. He says: "In the best poetry of our time—but only the best—one is aware of a moral pressure being exerted on the medium in the very act of creation. By 'moral' I mean a testing of existence at its highest pitch—what does it feel like to be totally oneself; an awareness of others beyond the self; a concern with values and meaning rather than with effects; an effort to tap the spontaneity that hides in the depths rather than what forms on the surface; a conviction about the possibility of making right and wrong choices. Lacking this pressure, we are left with nothing but a vacuum occupied by technique" (qtd. in Ryan 6). (I owe this passage to my poet-friend Marj Evasco.)

8. See Villa's "When, I, Was, No, Bigger, Than, a, Huge," in *Wake* 58; Villa's *Selected Poems and New* 87; Abad *Man of Earth* 160.

9. "Like the Grasses" appears as Francisco G. Tonogbanua's poem on page 21 of his collection, *Fallen Leaves* (1951), but it is the same poem by Ono No Yoshiki, trans. Arthur Waley (see Yohannan 249).

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