

TEACHING ENGLISH¹

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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The first part of my talk is derived from Wayne C. Booth's "The Credo of an English Teacher," his lead essay in his book, *The Vocation of a Teacher*², and the second part is a summation of my own convictions about language and literature.

I

We gather together every year to celebrate and exchange ideas and convictions about our profession. In a similar gathering, Wayne Booth asked: What is at the heart of teaching English as our profession? Do we have a common meeting ground despite our theoretical differences about the nature of language and about our approach to literature?

"English" as a profession began

as a catch-all inheritance from the collapse of classical studies [ancient Greek and Roman]. Those studies, because of the richness of classical literature, were an equally ill-defined assemblage of history, archeology, philology, grammar, logic, rhetoric, literary theory and criticism (poetics), and dialectic. When 'English' took over as the 'discipline' charged with the major responsibility for liberal education, it initially took over some remnants of all except archeology. But most of the disciplines

were quickly dropped or watered down, leaving philology and history for the specialists, and grammar and fragments of rhetoric for teachers of non-majors.

In short, there has always been a controversy about where we should turn to find a respectable center — some subject matter a bit more imposing than grammar and spelling... (Booth, 8) — that is, “the arts of reading, thinking, writing, and speaking.” [Booth, 9]

No matter what our theories about language and literature, or what our ideological advocacies, what we do at the very heart of our profession is the practice of the liberating arts in the language that we have learned to master. That was our first challenge: the mastery of the linguistic medium and its rhetorical tradition. From that wellspring of mastery we teach the liberating arts of reading, thinking, writing, and speaking. The language just happens to be English, and justifiably so, today, because English (like Spanish, I think) is both a global language and a global literature, and because its dominance is a historical fact in our own history — the same historical force that the world today has come to grips with. If it were Tagalog or Filipino, or Cebuano, or any other Philippine language that we are teaching from the same wellspring of linguistic mastery, it would be the same liberating arts that we would be teaching.

In our profession, we are

in the business of freeing ourselves into whatever [is] for us [individually] the next order of human awareness or understanding, the next step forward in our ability to join other minds, through language, ... to join them in — ... in what? Shall we call it “rationality”... [or] “critical intelligence”... [or]... “consciousness raising,” ... [or] critical understanding”... (Booth, 20-21)

That “business of freeing ourselves” through “critical understanding” is the central experience in the practice of the liberating arts — the same practice we try in our teaching to instill in our students; that practice is “our center that *deserves* our loving service and that can provide, when we appeal to it, a test of all that we do.” (Booth, 20-21)

[Today], whether working on my next book, or teaching an advanced graduate seminar in critical theory, or struggling with a... survey course for majors, I should be trying at every point to increase the chances ... that critical understanding will replace, on the one hand, sentimental and uncritical identifications that leave minds undisturbed and, on the other, hypercritical negations that freeze or alienate.

... whatever our theories about how [that critical understanding] happens or why it fails to happen... can we reasonably doubt the importance of that moment, at any level of study, when any of us... succeeds in entering other minds, or ‘taking them in,’ as nourishment for our own? Can anyone claim that we have no rationale for what we do, when the hunger for critical understanding is so seldom aroused and satisfied in our world? ... how then can we ever lack confidence in the importance of what we do... ? (Booth, 21)

Our culture - or any culture today, for that matter - is a “reading/writing/thinking/speaking culture”; indeed, one might regard culture as an ongoing conversation.

[Today] the only required ... reading-and-writing course in most [colleges] is something called ‘Freshman English,’ or ‘Freshman Composition’ or ‘Communication Skills’ ...

This being so, is it an exaggeration to say that the future of our reading/writing/thinking/speaking culture is mainly in the hands of ‘English teachers’?

That only if we serve and practice the arts that
used to be called [the] 'liberal' [arts] — grammar,
rhetoric, dialectic, logic — will [those arts] live?
That if we abandon them, they will probably die?
[Booth, 9-10]

II

To the very present, I've been teaching English as my profession since graduation at the University of the Philippines in 1963. I had excellent teachers who inspired me to join the faculty. What inspired me? - chiefly their passion for critical reading of the great works of literature, their commitment to critical thinking and luminous writing. I learned: where there is no question, there is no quest, and where none, the academic life would be a bore. I learned: where no words break, there one "thinks truth in his heart" (Psalms, 15: 3), and that is called wisdom. I became a skeptic — from Greek, *skeptesthai*, meaning "to look, to consider." That was what my college education equipped me for: a life of the mind, a care for thought that, this side of Eden, is our only light. Look and consider, to read close is to open. What we regard as the universal plane is not the realm of eternal verities, it is the site of everlasting questioning.

It is a curious thing that the word "dogma" is from Greek *dokein*, meaning "to seem, or to seem good," which is by definition what an opinion is: *dokein*. The word "opinion" itself is from Latin *opinari*, meaning "to suppose, imagine, or conjecture"; so, an opinion is anything that hovers between fact and fiction, with more or less of either one. That is how I read our newspaper columnists. Likewise, the word "theory" is from Greek *theoria*, meaning "a viewing"; hence, "viewpoint, a way of seeing." Thus, any theory is only a way of making sense. No theory has a monopoly of seeing. That is how I read our literary critics and theorists.

I think then that the most crucial factor in everyone's education is the love of reading. It begins early, and is nourished

over time by a deepening sense for language. Without reading with a fine sense for language, all education ceases, all pursuit of truth, knowledge, wisdom is at default. All our efforts in teaching English are directed at enhancing and enriching the student's sense for language — the supreme human invention, for without language, we have no history, no culture, no civilization. Every language grows organically through its usage by the finest minds, even as humanity's consciousness through intercourse also draws each one into a singular whole. It may be that language is our planet's internet: shall it weave all tongues into humanity's singular text? That metaphor of the tongue for language suggests that, when skillfully employed, language enables us to savor the truth or reality that it elucidates or evokes.

You can see, in our etymological trips, not only that English is both Latin and Greek through a great part of its multitudinous sea of words; not only that any language is omnivorous, assimilating words and nuances of words from various cultures; but also, most importantly, that the sense for language is the basic *poetic* sense, that is to say, our most intimate sense of our reality. "Poetic" is from Greek *poiein*, "to make": we think with words and words to make sense, language makes real to mind and imagination what we call "our world," and so, to write is to get real. The only reality we shall ever know, in science and in the humanities, is only, and nothing more than, our human reality, because what we grasp as "facts" are only what sense we make of anything we perceive. A cat's perceptions of its environment is different from ours; it inhabits a different world. Only with words and words of a given historical language do we give form to our perceptions whereby we grasp a sense of our reality, what we call "our world." In that light, we could regard language itself as already work of translation: the flesh made word, as it were. So writing also is translation — from Latin, *transferre*, *translatus*, "to convey or ferry across." To write is to ferry across the river of words and the images they evoke the reality or truth that we apprehend without hurt or injury to the mind's import and aim. *I'l ny a pas de hors-texte*, says Derrida: *There is nothing outside the text.* (But Shakespeare's Puck would perhaps counter: *Everything's out there and mocks the text!*)

This is why I put a premium on language. I put a premium too in the same instance on imagination, which is the finest intelligence. This is not a mere Romantic fancy. Without imagination, we have no literature, no art, no science, no technology. If the sense for language is the basic poetic sense because it is with words and words that we construct our sense of our world, then it is the poetic moment, the moment of writing, that "open[s] to the intuition that all language refuses," as the poet Yves Bonnefoy says.³ That intuition — the bread and wine of all great writers — is a power of the imagination by which language is enabled to transcend itself, to overcome its limitations by its own evocative resources: that is, those figures and images of thought and feeling, those "twisting or turnings of sense and reference,"⁵ by which the thinker-writer clears his own path through the fastnesses of language. He makes his own clearing within language, for he has his own way with language, his own distinctive style. Style, or the manner of expression by which a certain matter or subject is negotiated, is, says Albert Camus, "the simultaneous existence of reality and of the mind that gives reality its form."⁵

"All that language refuses" is opened up by the writing, for as the writer Jose Dalisay says, "the knowing is in the writing." But what is language's refusal? That is symptomatic of its inadequacy to reality, for language fixes our perceptions with labels and names, and we are entrapped in abstractions. Yet, language secretly yearns to be free. That word "text" is from Latin *texere*, *textus*, "to weave." It is the imagination that through a writer's distinctive style weaves the text by which the words are set free to evoke, to call forth to mind, the truth or reality that we seek. The words of any language are single and bereft in the dead sea of the language's dictionary. No meaningfulness arises from there because the meanings of words do not arise from themselves, nor from their differential relations, but from lives lived as imagined: that is to say, the words come to life only when writer or reader light them up with their imagination; for only then are the words brought into interplay in some order by which a thought or feeling, a human experience, is endowed with definite form. From there, that form made up wholly of elected

words, a meaningfulness arises, from reader to reader, each one drawing imaginatively from his experience of the world in his own community of a shared ideology or world-view. Sometimes we use the expression, "in other words ...", as to say, we are on the verge of language, we are pushing our thinking/writing/speaking to the edge of language, attempting to find another way of weaving our text to endow with definite form an elusive thought or feeling.

Having said all that about language and imagination, what then is a literary work?

Anything *literary* – poetry, fiction, play, essay – is wrought *from* language; "wrought," the past of "work," for the writer works the language, as the farmer the soil, so their medium might bear fruit. Thus, we call any poem or short story a "literary work": a work of language. As wrought, the poem's words (I use "poem" as a generic term for all literary works) bring the past alive to the present, for the writer brings to life what he remembers, and thereby, offers the sensitive reader a gift; the reader need only open with his own imagination the writer's present.

The literary work is, of course, and above all, work of imagination, even as language itself, ceaselessly refreshed or reinvented, is the finest invention of the human imagination. Imagination entails work of memory; the ancient Greeks were right when they thought of Mnemosyne as the mother of the nine Muses. Memory brings to life what is past, what in one's experience has moved one's soul. "To remember," says Eduardo Galeano, is in Spanish, "recordar," which derives from Latin, "re-cordis," that is, "to pass through the heart."⁶ For the heart's memory is the profoundest, that which has most stirred one's whole being.

I think the matter of all literary works is a human experience, and the language of all excellent writing is language made aware of the miracle of living. What is a human experience? - the very word, "experience," tells us from its Greek and Latin etymology – in Greek, *enpeiran*; in Latin, *experiri* – both Greek and Latin

meaning, 1st, "to try or attempt," and thus, the English words, "empirical" and "experiment"; 2nd, "to fare or go on a journey"; 3rd, "to undergo," that is, to suffer, to endure; and 4th, "to pass through," that is, to meet with chance and danger where nothing is certain. That is the rich meaningfulness of that one word, "experience." A thought or a feeling is already a human experience; a mood or state of mind, a stance or attitude, is a human experience. If the only reality we shall ever know is a human reality, the individual is the only reality: such is the compass and limit of human experience. The reality of a community is that of a shared experience, a shared vision and way of living. Shared through and in language.

When we consider a literary work, we regard it first as *literary*: that is, both as work of language and as work of imagination. As work of language, we regard its craft, mindful of the writer's way with language and its rhetorical tradition. As work of imagination, we contemplate its vision and meaningfulness, for its mimesis or simulation of a human experience is already an interpretation of it. Only afterwards might we consider other factors or forces that made the work possible or that might elucidate certain aspects of its nature other than its *literariness*; such other factors as the author's own life or psychology (we would of course have to examine all his works), the social and intellectual forces in his own time, his own country's history and culture, etc. Here lies the value of other theories or approaches than the philological and formalist (despite every theory's limitations and excesses). Since theory is essentially a way of looking from certain basic assumptions, none is apodictic (absolutely certain). Every literary discussion is an effort at critical understanding.

The literary work is basically rhetorical in nature: it aims to persuade and thereby to move and give pleasure. That is its *dynamis*, power, or effect (in Tagalog, *dating*): *dulce et utile*, says Horace – revel and revelation, I would translate.

Dating: the work literally *arrives*: that is, it stirs the reader's imagination and, persuaded by the authenticity of the imagined experience, be that only an emotional outburst or a train of

reflection, the reader is moved at the core of his being as human. The good and the true and the beautiful: these are clichés, abstractions, even (if you will) illusions; but when they come alive in a particular scene or human situation, with words and words through imagery and metaphor and other figures of thought which arouse the imagination, then the work, "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing,"⁷ arrives. The good, the true, and the beautiful – and their opposites, as well – arise in the flesh, as it were, and convict us without pity: we cry tears or are purged in laughter. "A book," says J. M. Coetzee, "should be an axe to chop open the frozen sea inside us."⁸

In sum: whatever the literary work's *paksa* (subject or theme), it is the work's *saysay* (point, significance, meaningfulness) and the work's *diwa* (spirit, vision, stance or attitude toward reality) that endow the *paksa* with persuasive and emotional force (*dating*). What are requisite for any reader are a deep sense for language and a capacity for that close reading which opens the text: that word-weave, after all, has already come to terms with itself. Any interpretation of the text is a coming to terms with it, too. Of course, interpretations of *paksa*, *saysay*, and *diwa* may vary because the reader draws from his own life experience, his wide reading, and his own psyche which comprises his own temperament and predilections, biases and ideological advocacies. So, as you read, you are also read.

Play of language, play of mind, for revel and revelation – *that* is the "literary work." Imagination herself is player and mimic with various guises and masks: tragic, comic, satiric, or ironic, so that it encompasses all of our living from sun to sun. For craft, play of language, because one must ever try to override and transcend the voids and inadequacies of language by its own evocative power, and thereby enhance its capacity to forge new forms or renew past "habitations of the word."⁹ And for cunning, play of mind, because there are no absolute certainties. On that so-called universal plane, we are one species: *homo sapiens*, presumably. On that plane, nationality is a legal fiction, and one's country is only how one imagines her as one stands upon his own ground: that is, his own heartland's culture and history through fleeting time.

NOTES

¹ The first draft of this talk was delivered as the Keynote Speech at the National Conference on Language and Literature: Paradigms, Principles, and Practices on September 12, 2012, SMX Convention Center, Metro Manila organized by College English Association (CETA) and the Department of English and Comparative Literature, College of Arts and Letters, University of the Philippines - Diliman.

²Booth, *The Vocation of a Teacher / Rhetorical Occasions 1967-1988* (University of Chicago, 1988); "Introduction," pp. 3-10; "The Credo of an English Teacher," pp. 11-27.

³"Interview with Yves Bonnefoy" by John Naughton, in Bonnefoy's *In the Shadow's Light*, tr. John Naughton (University of Chicago, 1991), p. 163.

⁴John Hollander, *Melodious Guile / Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (Yale University, 1988), p. 1.

⁵<http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/AlbertCamus>

⁶Epigraph to Galeano's *The Book of Embraces*, tr. Cedric Belfrage with Mark Schafer (W.W. Norton, 1992).

⁷From Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, "The Windhover."

⁸From Coetzee's novel, *Summertime* (Penguin Books, 2009), p. 61.

⁹William H. Gass, *Habitations of the Word / Essays* (N.Y.: Touchstone Book, Simon and Schuster, 1986).