

LITERATURE AND GENDER [AND SEX*]

J. NEIL C. GARCIA

Let me begin by saying that I don't think Salvador P. Lopez's famous essay ever offered a theory of "reading" literature. Rather, given all its eloquent exhortations for the poet or the artist to write "good" or "useful" literature that will benefit society, and help solve its manifold problems, what this foundational essay would seem to be offering is a manifesto of sorts.

To me, Lopez's "Literature and Society"¹ is nothing if not the articulation of a personal poetics—a subjective reckoning of literary creativity—by a Filipino thinker who obviously saw himself as an artist, or at least profoundly sympathized with such an identity. Allow me to declare it now: because of the "personal" polemic of Lopez's text, my engagement with it here will have to take a personal turn, as well.

To be specific, this realization bids me to treat the subject I am supposed to discuss in today's forum from the perspective of a creative writer, rather than a critic (in sum, the difference between the two may be appreciated in the following analogy: what to the latter is typically fallacious and/or irrelevant is, for the former, an earnest rehearsal of the will). However, since I also "do" theory, and write criticism, allow me at this point to perform a brief "critical" exposition, as well.

This task must begin with the following statement: while the value of Lopez's essay is undoubtedly incalculable in our country's literary history, precisely its "significance" needs to be historicized—which is to say, situated within a genealogy of critical thinking (particularly, Marxist) about the relationship between ideology and culture, power and art.

Offhand, it's easy to see just how staunchly masculinist this essay is in its grammatical suppositions; moreover, as a rhapsodic "acclamation," its central premise is a historically

circumscribed—and, by now, mooted—understanding of the analytic “separability” of artistic form and content.

We may, in particular, take issue with the reflectionist assumption that Lopez makes about the social function of artistic representation. Needless to say, such a schema has already been qualified and in a sense “rectified” by the radical reconceptualizations of the notion of form—from thinkers of the Frankfurt School, for instance.² As we know, these and other critics have variously argued that it is formally self-reflexive (in their specific context, “modernist”) art that is “authentic” and liberative, precisely because by complicating, intensifying, or “thickening” its material medium, this formalistic persuasion effectively unmasks naïve realism for the ideological ruse that it is. In this manner, it can be further argued that it is precisely difficult or “self-conscious” art that offers perceptibly complex textualities, which far from mystifying actually encourage critical thinking in its audiences.

On the other hand, complimenting this “reframing” of the Marxist issue of form, the Althusserian turn (from the late 60s to the 70s) also problematizes the question of a purely materialist determination of culture, deeming art as a cultural practice that mediates between science and ideology.³ What this means is that as a signifying activity, art is eminently capable of realist reflection on one hand, and of self-interrogation and critical subversion, on the other. The Althusserian aesthetic position also makes it possible to see how artistic forms betray their ideological premises, deconstructing or unwittingly presenting contradictions in the artistic work, despite or precisely because of its maker’s declared intentions.

And so, as against Lopez’s passionate admonishings—and by virtue of the historical progression of critical theory—nowadays the aim of Marxist-inspired interpretations of literature is to conceptualize its object of study in increasingly complex (rather than simplistic) terms. For example, Marxist literary critics now typically distinguish between a text’s manifest and latent contents (meaning, its “conscious” and its “unconscious”), reading symptomatically for standard or even newer “materialist”

themes—for example, the alienation of labor and class struggle on one hand, and power and discursive resistance on the other—which the author may not even be fully aware of. Also, rather than dismiss certain artistic predilections and extol others, most Marxist critics nowadays choose to historicize (and in a sense, make sensible and theoretically acceptable) literary forms and styles, by arguing for the ways they are merely products of cultural conditionalities and political circumstances.

Sadly, then, Lopez's essentialist preference for certain procedures, his endorsement of certain humanistic sensibilities, can only strike us now as a peculiarly dated stance—one that is, frankly speaking, no longer critically defensible. On the other hand, the question of language, which Lopez didn't touch on at all, likewise complicates the reflection paradigm to which he wholeheartedly subscribed, because writing in the language of colonization (an implicit compositional procedure, going by this important essay's own example) cannot ever be synonymous with simple unmediated representation at all. Needless to say, the most that a literature in a second or foreign language in a culturally hybrid context can achieve is a transformational or "translational" kind of imitation—one that is characterized by the kinds of opacities and ironies that one typically exclusively associates with self-reflexive art.⁴ Thus, the agonistic debate between the "aestheticist" and the "social realist," which Lopez was instrumental in defining (and embittering), may be seen as spurious, because theoretically untenable, at least as far as anglophone writing in a postcolonial context is concerned.

Turning, then, to the question of gender: for more than fifty years now, the feminist position—of which Lopez's essay, written in the early part of the twentieth century, was understandably profoundly ignorant—has sought to rethink the notion of culture (not just literature) itself by reevaluating the female experience through the study of the neglected texts (not just literary), by women. It has also sought to examine the representations of women by men, calling into question the imaging of women as other (or as "lack"), as well as the conflation of women with the idea of a passive and amorphous "nature." In