Finding Genoa, Finding Myself  
Notes on Reading, Language, Travelling, and Mobility  
(Pag-aapuhap sa Genoa, Pag-aapuhap ng Sarili Mga Tala sa Pagbabasa, sa Wika, sa Paglalakbay at Paglalayag)

Luna Sicat Cleto  
University of the Philippines Diliman

"To remember" is not a passive or active form, while "recollection" presumably the active search for particular memories is in fact passive—not even medial—in form. "Recollection" or "reminiscence" is the passive form of the verb "to remind." Accordingly, "recollection or reminisce is a being reminded, it involves one thing putting us in mind of another."

— Melody Niwott

ABSTRACT

In this work, the author recounts her personal experience as an exchange scholar in Genoa, Italy, under the Erasmus Mundi Mobility programme. Told in two languages, English and Filipino, the author articulates what could be a typical mode of worlding an Asian scholar might have, if given the chance to see the sights in Europe. Realizing her linguistic preparation for Italian is insufficient, she begins to acknowledge her alterity as an English-speaking persona. She also realizes the complexity of lived time with strangers in a foreign land. Finding a translated text by Elsa Morante in a public library becomes a breather for the persona in the essay. The translated work, "History," becomes an ironic commentary of how parallel existences can happen, experiencing hunger and loneliness similar to the fictional characters who lived in Mussolini’s time. Embedded in the narrative are brief recollections of mundane scenes in public spaces and transport, while the persona is coping with cultural gaps.
It is said that travel widens one's horizons, increases one's self awareness, and deepens one's understanding of history, both personal and national, or in my case, international relations. I came to Genoa, Italy, as a scholar of Translation Studies, quite confident in my abilities in the language (Italian) as I was deluded to be. And why not? Learning a new language seemed to be easy. It was all a matter of investing one's energies and focusing on words, words, words. It was another story when I arrived there.

I used to think of translation as a simple, everyday task. In reassessing my stay in Italy in the spring of 2012, I realize now how simple minded this statement was. If I am a subject formed by generations of translated texts, being a by-product of an educational system that consumed texts from the colonial and postcolonial imaginary, I can also say that I am part of an intellectual transmission belt of disseminating not only translated texts but also ideologies and imagined communities. If it is so, translation is far from being a simple, everyday task. And yet, strangely, for the longest time, I thought it was.

As a teacher of Philippine Literature, one's alterity as an English speaker vacillates in its visibility and invisibility. Filipino is the medium of instruction, but to be honest, much of the critical preparation that a competent professor must have is channeled not through Filipino alone, but in English as well. Since English is widely accepted as the language of the educated, I use it most especially when I move around in circles outside of the academe, in which, sadly, one's external appearance and language used is a "credible" measure of one's worth. I mask it when I move around in territories wherein that language widens the economic gap, or the fact that education is a privilege enjoyed by a few, and using English can alienate the speaker from her audience. This liminality of tongues has its own effacement and belligerence: I can speak, write, or think in English if I have to, when I have to.

A course such as Filipino 50 (Survey on Philippine Literature) is a usual subject included in my academic load. It features works produced in the oral as well as in

Reading, and writing about the process of reading, becomes an act of salvation as well. Finding other people of color (economic or political exiles), the author recognizes the porosity as well as the impermeability of Italian as a language, when she realizes that comprehension of the language does not necessarily translate as power.

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the written traditions, works that were spawned during the precolonial period, during the colonization of Spain, the American period, the Commonwealth era, the Post-War years, until the Contemporary period. Works in the regional languages are studied, but they are scrutinized in their translated versions. Encountering texts in their half-life or mutated forms is also an everyday occurrence in teaching Philippine literature, for much is lost not only in the process of translation, but also in the framing of how these “found precolonial texts” are much heftier in number, and in scope, prior to print culture. Categorized as such (oral-written, historical periods inclusive) the student inevitably links the study of literature with history as well, for it can incite her to reflect about the nature and dynamic of collective memory, and collected narratives. As a professor of Philippine Literature, I believe I am part of the symbolic analyst workforce. We are responsible, after all, in teaching courses that encompass national identity, strengthening the people’s sense of history by exposing and touring their minds in the highest aesthetic engagement words can have: that is, through literature.

Since we are a nation fomented by traumatic experiences with its many invasions and periods of colonial regimes, it is inevitable that our attitude to the language of the colonizer would shift each time the balance of power changes. There is a whole generation of Filipino intellectuals for example, who wrote in Spanish, in the mid 1800s until the turn of the century. Spanish then was the language of the ruling class and upward mobility. On the one hand, it was a language that had racial, and racist, leanings, but on the other hand, it was also the language that was the vessel of many nationalist writings. The religious orders who were also the conduits of education made sure that even the criollo (creole) who speaks Spanish is not a guarantee for his or her integration into power. Accounts of the Filipino heroes who lived during these times in their memoirs, correspondences, and other literary output could attest to this discrimination. Ordinary indios could learn the language, but at the cost of enslaving themselves to the friar, or the benevolent principalia who were willing to hire his or her services as muchachos, maids, etc. Education was a privilege and not a right in those days. When the Americans came into power, largely with the help of other ilustrados who abandoned ship with Madre Espanya, and the failed (albeit unfinished) revolution of the Katipunan, they cleverly included the reform of the educational system in their colonialist agenda. Unlike Spanish which was a language that had its gatekeepers, English was a language that the public school of the American period came hand in hand with. And so it wasn’t a surprise when a whole generation of writers writing in English bloomed—fictionists like Paz Marquez Benitez and Franz Arcellana, poets like Rafael de la Costa and Angela Manalang Gloria, essayists like Salvador P. Lopez, Kerima Polotan Tuvera,
and Nick Joaquin. The canon of literature they became familiar with was Anglo-American. Predictably, this historical development bred a mentality hereafter branded as one of the major obstacles toward our own sovereignty as a people: colonial mentality.

Were the Americans far better colonial masters than the Spaniards? Of course not. History can speak of the many atrocities the Yankee has brought: massacres, tortures, "pacification campaigns," not to mention its present neocolonial influence in or national politics and culture. But then I may be getting ahead of myself: my point is—learning a language includes historical battles, struggles. Acquiring a second language masks another history that is subsumed, suppressed and silenced.

It is interesting that one’s ability in English became the usable, albeit too convenient part of my learning at the Erasmus Mobility program. My first meeting with Prof. Laura Salmon, in her Translation Studies class, has emphasized that translation is not that easy, and it isn’t a given skill for anybody who is literate, and can speak, write, or read in another language other than one’s mother tongue. Prof. Laura Salmon is a full professor of Russian Language and Literature and her expertise includes Russian-Jewish literature, translation theory, onomastics, Russian linguistics, and humor studies. Aside from publishing a book on translation theory and the novel, some of the Russian authors she translated are: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Dovlatov. In 2009 she won the Monselice Prize for Literary Translation and the Tolstoy Prize for Translation in September 2013 for her translation of The Idiot by Dostoevsky. Salmon proceeded to discuss her translation process of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, and she demonstrated how translators have the potential to allow the author to speak more clearly.

As an observer in her translation class, I noted the liveliness of her students as they presented their specific issues about their current translation projects. This sharing of ideas between teacher and student was a hands-on learning philosophy. Prof. Salmon stressed the critical thinking that comes not just with the word choice, but the entire conceptual frame that involves the author, the text, the reader, and the intended audience. One student engaged her professor in a healthy argument. "Translating between Italian to French and vice versa is not prestabilito (predetermined), it takes a thorough understanding of the nation’s culture, history, and everyday life," Prof. Salmon said. "One is marked by language, in the same way one marks language. A simple greeting like 'Ciao!' when used inappropriately by a person ignorant of the distinction between Tu and Lei can pave a misunderstanding."
Similar to the intense listening training of conductors and performers, a translator must pay attention to everything that is in the text and beyond the text. She must also be aware of what the author is actually saying behind, or underneath the forage of description. Word choices from the translator can illuminate, or obscure, other facets of the narrative discourse from the original text. In chapter 8, part six of the novel *Anna Karenina*, second lead characters Levin and Kitty are spending their summer in the country, and while Tolstoy evokes the physical appearance and clothes of these men and women, a whole discourse on class, upbringing, ethnic identities, and even the attitude of the author towards these categories are revealed. Valenska Veslovsky comes across as a nouveau rich young upstart, having the confidence to lead the pack, with his "big new boots that came halfway through his thick thighs, in a green blouse girdled by a new cartridge belt smelling of leather" and "a Scotch cap with trailing ribbons." An outfit that flags his alien position in the countryside; whereas the Old World aristocrat Stiva Oblonsky is wearing "rawhide shoes, with rough leggings, torn trousers, and a short coat." He may not be as fashionably dressed as Veslovsky, but his gun, his game bag, and his cartridge belt hail his long experience in hunting as leisure. Prof. Salmon stressed that even the word "shoes" cannot encapsulate Oblonsky's footwear, for in the original Russian, Tolstoy employs *porshni* and *podvertki*—words culled from "colloquial peasant vocabulary." If the translator is serious with her task, she would be mindful in her simulation of the author's precision. Porshni is "the simplest kind of leather shoes, commonly made from a single rectangular piece of oiled leather, with the corners connected in pairs, and a leather thong threaded on the top edge," while podvertki are "cloths worn around the foot and lower leg." Both items are specific to the Russian culture and milieu, embodied in their paintings of peasants and aristocrats, or soldiers and social outcasts.

Later, over foccacetta and zucca de fruta, Prof. Salmon shared some of her opinions about the reading culture of the Italians. (I have, on that occasion, told her my difficulty of acquiring an English translation of any of Elsa Morante's opus.) Shocked and almost indignant, then shifting to good natured humor, she said, "Of course you can't find a Morante translation here in Italy! Hahaha." Of course! But I couldn't explain to her then that I was coming from another perspective. I tried to explain the complexity of relations between English, Filipino, and the other Philippine languages. At home, I said, the television broadcast of CNN, or BBC, or even the local news, ANC, use English. Imported drama series from the US, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, or South America, have subtitles in English. In libraries or bookstores, books are written in English, and only a section, labeled Filipiniana, is allotted to books written by Filipino authors, on the subject of anything Philippine. A major
part of the rubric that we claim to be "national literature" is written in English. Interestingly, although the national literature written in Filipino has densely symbolic value (it is, after all, "national") and has been associated with protest and nationalist literature (against the Marcos dictatorship, for example) it cannot seem to validate itself in the terrain of world literature, it remains, sadly, invisible, unless incarnated in translations, or denigrated, seen as the channel for low art. It remains understood only within its geographical boundaries, its flow of energy flowing into the filter of canon. Yes, Filipino as a language remains marginal, in spite of the diaspora of Filipino families and Filipinos in the labor force in the global arena. Perhaps it is precisely because its speakers remain, on the majority, with limited agency: reacting, instead of acting, on their individual, as well as collective limitations. Street vendors, society matrons, adolescent girls giddy about their school crushes, call center agents—I could go on with the spectra—they are all familiar with English. And what about Filipino? Oh yes, they do know that language. But whenever they refer to its existence, it invokes an entirely different political, as well as cultural, identity. President Benigno S. Aquino Jr., for example, prides himself in his articulations in the so called "language of the masses": "Kayo ang aking boss" / "You are my boss" / "Tu sei il mio capo." That does not guarantee, however, that he truly understands, or he truly is concerned about their welfare, or he represents the Filipino Everyman, if we assume that the word "masses" exists in the first place, or if we consider the downward movement of his popularity among his constituents, now that his honeymoon with the media is over. English, like Filipino, has its own complex set of markedness, both languages are capable as vessels of emancipatory ideas, and yet both can be used as currency for oppression, deceit, and abuse of power on a national scale.

Prof. Salmon laments the onslaught of television, of the American way, channelled through media, which the younger generation don't seem to be critical of. Vigorously I nod and quip that the same thing is happening in my country, as elsewhere. "It has robbed the younger generation of the pleasures of reading," she said, fighting the din of young people eating, laughing, playing cards inside the bar. She compares the reading habits of the Italians with the Russians, whom, she says, read a lot, in spite of glasnost and perestroika. Much later, I verified this observation through my own research. Borodkin and Chugnov's findings on the reading habits of Russian workers in early twentieth century was illuminating because the researchers used qualitative sources such as library catalogs, zemstvo publications¹, and other archival material. Aside from its commentary on print culture, Borodkin and Chugnov elucidate Salmon's claim that the reading culture of the Russians is indeed very much rooted in the politicization of workers, and this mark is distinct, and very strong, as compared to other cultures of the world.
Since the Industrial Revolution, each year signified a progression for the reading culture of workers, until their reading habits were enhanced, and has become part of their everyday life. The zemstvos, or Russian local self-governing institutions, played a large part in developing this culture. It initiated the setting up of public libraries, elementary schools, and other institutions. “The local intelligentsia and the zemstvos undertook various sociological research projects and surveys in order to study the reading culture and social composition of public users in many Russian provinces” (Borodkin and Chugunov 143). Libraries began to appear in Russian factories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Books were borrowed individually, but there were group readings and discussions done by the workers amongst themselves. Most of them wanted to read the Russian classics, historical novels, and travel accounts, but they also voraciously consumed other kinds of reading material in the sciences and industrial arts. They also consumed the more incendiary works present in periodicals and pamphlets of a political nature. And although “political literature that had been prohibited by the government could not find its way into any factory library indeed the reading of such pamphlets and books carried the risk of instant dismissal” (Borodkin and Chugunov 150), the consumption of such articles were provided by the younger members of the intelligentsia, who were in their teens and early twenties.

I am reminded of how Andres Bonifacio managed to educate himself through extensive reading, as a factory worker in Fressell and Company in the 1880s, or how Emilio Jacinto facilitated the intellectual culture of the Katipunan by initiating discussions on “kalayaan.” The Russian intelligentsia and its workforce in the factories worked together, each twin listening and adapting to the other’s needs, both on equal footing when it comes to reforms.

The intelligentsia organized lectures for workers at various industrial establishments, while establishing a People’s Middle school for workers—which had a positive effect in fostering apprenticeships. These were orchestrated moves, so that education can “raise the qualitative and quantitative productivity of workers’ labor, lessen drunkenness, reduce the number of accidents they suffer, lessen the damage caused to machines (lessening expenditures on repairs), tools and engines, reduce the deplorable level of theft of factory property, and improve to a significant extent the relationship between factory owners and workers” (Borodkin and Chugunov 144). I cannot help but compare this kind of reading culture with the representations of the Filipino workforce today, how distanced some members of the modern Filipino intelligentsia are to the production of a literate workforce. Prof. Salmon laments the fact that her critical work is written in a language—
Russian—that is not read by most Italians. Another subtitle was running inside my brain, something along the lines of “Hindi ba’t ganyan ang kalagayan ng karamihan ng mga nagsusulat ngayon sa wikang Filipino?” Her sigh and my sudden silence after her remark affirmed my intuitive reading that we shared a common thread at that moment.

Figure 1. Pigeon sitting on a traffic light. Photo by Luna Sicat Cleto.

Sweltering heat in the summer, enough to make you think you are the proverbial frog inside the boiling kettle of climate change, but you have to concentrate on listening through your student's oral report. The luckier ones who were assigned to rooms that had air-conditioning would tell you that a puddle has formed in the middle of the room, dripping from the freon inside a faulty aircon unit. Hallways and rooms full of students, their laughter and chatter re-echoing endlessly, their noise similar to the sound of bees trapped in jars. Some are well-dressed and are affluent to drive their own cars, but most are facing the grim reality of rising tuition fees. As you ascend the flight of stairs, your breathing becomes ragged by the time you reach the fourth floor. A voice calling your name, her face and gait similar to yours, that sad, dignified air that most academics have when they see one another in
flights of stairs of old, and not so new buildings that have structural damages symbolic of the state's paltry attention to public education. As you direct your gaze on the opposite end, you notice the empty rooms—some of your colleagues are playing hooky again, and you sigh. There’s a reproduction of Carlos Botong Francisco’s mural, featuring the Cry of Pugadlawin: a visual trajectory of the revolution of 1896 and the Katipunan. Bonifacio’s eyes are particularly intense, sometimes their inner rage seem to be reflecting your own. Rainy or sunny weather, many professors like yourself would probably experience these moments of self-doubt concerning one’s career in the humanities. Elsewhere in the world, you realize that the teaching profession in humanities also suffers from budget cuts, rising economic costs in housing and basic needs, educated people suffering from state apathy.

These images have trailed me, even as far as that university hall in Genoa along Corso Dugalli, where I was sitting in, on that very same day after Prof. Salmon’s lecture. It was a large class, perhaps 50 or 60 students, and Prof. Massimo Bacigalupo seemed at ease when he strode down the aisle. Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and T. S. Eliot’s poetry were the assigned readings. Anderson’s book was on the desk of my seatmate, and the young woman generously allowed me to use it. The book was new and its pages were crisp, devoid of earmarks or pencilled comments. Its owner was more attuned to her boyfriend’s chatter, as most of them were. I was transported back in time when I was a college student. How indifferent I was to my professor’s ideas. Life, as it were, seemed to be happening elsewhere, and not within the confines of the classroom. My disinterest was not only because I was young, but it also stemmed from questioning the bias that my professors had about the cultural text that was before us. Here is the same text that I studied in college, but its effect is no longer singular, the grotesque in Anderson’s work could probably have my likeness, being locked in this cultural anguish. I was not aware at that time that Prof. Bacigalupo’s interest in Anglo-American literature was connected to his father’s friendship with the poet Ezra Pound, who was a frequent visitor in their house at Rapallo. Bacigalupo’s personal/domestic space was once the cultural hub of artists like Gerard Hauptmann, Isaiah Berlin, and Eva Hesse. Later, I found out that he was not just an academic, he was also a translator and filmmaker, the driving force in that university when it came to organizing poetry lectures, performances, competitions, and publications.

Prof. Bacigalupo’s eyes caught mine. Nervous that my boredom was evident, I decided to participate in the discussion, because the lecture’s critical framework is familiar—formalist, with some psychoanalytical touches. At that moment, I did not have to
speak in Italian. Soon, I swam in the language that enabled me to find my bearings but at some point I sensed that I may be disrupting the class. But Prof. Bacigalupo did not seem to mind. He welcomed my input, even if it did not quite conform with his reading.

In hindsight, Prof. Bacigalupo’s class gave me a glimpse of the state of education in Italy. These Italian youths have slayed the idea of the primacy of attendance for example, or staying in class until the professor’s lecture is over. I was quite alarmed when I noticed some students leaving while the professor was still in the midst of his lecture. This is unheard of back home, wherein such behavior could spark debates about the respect of the student toward the faculty. Prof. Bacigalupo explained that it is not out of disrespect, but more of understanding the commuter status that some students may have, catching outbound trains and so on. How pragmatic the professor’s attitude was, I thought. Later, it became a challenge to think about the untold history as to why this classroom dynamic has evolved—could it have sprung out of a robust history of student movements, wherein the rights of the youth to define his own education are focused on? I will never know.

Next in line for the observation was Prof. John Douthwaite’s class. The lineup of my classes was clearly methodical—a translation class in the morning, and then a course in comparative literature in the afternoon, and a day later, a serving of Stylistics. A native of Great Britain, Prof. John Douthwaite could easily pass for a casting of Henry VIII with his build and demeanor. He oriented me about the class: they are in their third year, they’re a bright bunch, and he wanted me to facilitate a writing lesson for his students. Most of them, he says, have experienced travel. They have had some exposure to other cultures in western Europe. Literary theories and concepts were embedded in their lessons. In hindsight, I asked myself why Prof. Douthwaite emphasized these points about his students. Surely this is not just part of one’s psychic preparation. Is he saying that from where I come from travel is not common, exposure to European culture is not a given, and literary concepts and theories may not be embedded in the lessons? Perhaps.

Prof. Douthwaite discussed an excerpt from *The Inheritors* by William Golding. He posited that the novel’s style is different from Golding’s previous work *The Lord of the Flies,* “it may be simple and sensuous, but the point of view is the Neanderthal mind.” This choice of consciousness implies a state of denial on the part of the author: that narrative voice can only perceive, but cannot understand, nor articulate in words these stimuli, because Golding’s characters live through their senses and their anthropomorphic view of nature and the inanimate. Therefore the novel is not
only an artistic challenge in worlding, it is also an imaginative challenge for both
the author and the reader; as its consciousness is clear of thought and judgment
pertaining to hatred, suspicion, or fear. Golding, Douthwaite says, subverts the idea
that it is the meek who shall inherit the earth. The inheritors are killers of the
meek.

"Consider this sentence," Prof. Douthwaite said, directing the attention of his students
to a large television monitor that flashed the relevant passage. "Their ears as if
endowed with separate life sorted the tangle of tiny sounds and accepted them, the
sound of breathing, the sound of wet clay flaking and ashes falling in." He paused
and observed his students' reaction. Some have furrowed their brows in thought,
others stared at their shoes or their companion's earlobes. "Does anyone here notice
anything about the quality of life of these Neanderthals?" In silence, I wanted to
say, perhaps this is how the Aetas once lived, as they gathered around the fire and
exchanged stories, before they became dispossessed. Of course I could not share
that thought, because I am unsure if they could relate to the "history" of a
straniera
like me. "The river sleeps or is awake, the trees have ears, the island is a huge thigh,
shin and foot, logs go away, everything is alive ... the fire eats and dances ...." In
silence, I also wanted to say that sometimes, even my own senses assume a life of
their own.

"The question is, how did Golding hear this 'original' language and translate it in
English?" Again, they furrowed their brows, stared at their shoes or their companion's
earlobes. In hindsight, these silences in these observed classes may have urged me
to reflect about my own stance as a "tourist" in the curricula. How do I translate my
"original" thoughts while looking back on my employment background, my personal
history, my perceived sense of being a Filipina in an alien country? Like the
Neanderthals in the story I struggle with words to meet the demands of necessity
and change.

In the last leg of this grand tour of the Humanities, I was able to share some of the
lessons that I teach as a professor of creative writing. Prof. Anne McDormind invited
me to facilitate a writing session in her Journalism class. She, like me, is not an
Italian. She is Canadian, and her late husband was Genoese who spent many years in
her home country. Prof. McDormind told me that she used to be a journalist, hence,
she was very familiar with the elements of good news writing: brevity, clarity,
relevance, and so on. On that day, her class discussed "Parts of the Umbrella" in
order to write a short piece on the process of using one.
Some of the class giggled and rolled their eyes. Reading their body language one could say that they were wondering what the heck was that all about. Undaunted, Prof. McDormind stressed the importance of brainstorming, finding verbs with a crunch (relevance), and being specific and concrete about the steps in a process. The class proceeded with the exercise. In my head I was wondering at the synchronicity of it all. How I, like a *stranieri*, had found an umbrella in this same class, with Prof. McDormind’s generosity of time, and trust, in teaching them about the rudiments of creative writing in one lesson only and then *Ciao! Arrivederci! Grazie!* How fortunate that they could not read minds, as do I, for in that moment, I was frantically seeking within my brain and my heart as to why I thought of Writing About Home as an exercise, using Photography as a method.

Later, over a glass of Coca Cola and some cigarettes, Anne and I shared some shoptalk about how difficult and rewarding it is to teach creative writing. She said part of her struggle with her teaching is there isn’t enough writing at all that is being asked from the student. Graded recitations and exams. The reliance on memorization as a tool to learn. The tradition in Italy of the professor doing the lecture, the students listening in. Maybe you can try going out for a walk, I said, with your students? I remembered a pleasant stroll down the promenade with my mentor Prof. Elisa Bricco and another colleague from Erasmus. Prof. Bricco mentioned how a walk is one of the best methods to travel, and to know the world, and I couldn’t agree more. A walk is also the best activity to think, and to write.

Figure 2. Train with passengers boarding by Uliano Lucas

“The past is another country.” (L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*)
Hanggang ngayon, nakapatagtakang hindi ko maibalangkas ang aking naging karanasan sa bayan iyon sa iisang wika. Waring naging lansangan rin ang aking kamalayan, na sinusumpong rin ng trapiko mga wika, at ng mga salita. May opisyal na bersyon ang sanaysay na ito, ipinasa bilang huling kahilingan para maiproseso ang saysay ng aking pagtungo bilang iskolar sa exchange program ng Erasmus Mundi mobility programme. Ang kasalukuyang teksto'y hindi ang opisyal na bersyon—at tutukuyin ko ito bilang pinipin at pinatahimik na bersyon, ngunit ngayon'y lumalantad. Alam ng sinumang nakaunawa na sa paglalakbay, may dalawa naman talagang espasyong pinangyarihan—ang pisikal na heograpiya at ang interyor na lupain. Alam rin ng sinumang nakaunawa sa pagsasalin na may orihinal na teksto at may salin—na kailanma'y hindi maghuhugpong, bagaman galing sa teknikalidad, sa iisang punla.


Hindi lang wika ang natutuhan ko sa maikling biyang iyon, nakasalamuhang ko rin pati ang mga kuwento ng mga taong ibig mag-aral ng wika. May kaniya-kaniya kaming...


Finding Genoa, Finding Myself


“’We seem to have no other way of describing “lived time” save in the form of a narrative.’ – Jerome Bruner.

“The sea does not care,” announced the lead sentence from a text about the seemingly endless wave of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean, only to be drowned, or, if they do survive, turned away at Europe’s ports. During my stay in Genoa, I could already see the evidence of these waves. The migrants are mostly from the African continent: Sudanese, Eritreans, Senegalese, Nigerians; while some are from the Middle East: Syrians, Moroccans. Hundreds have drowned in boats that are overflowing, or have capsized. The Italian navy has rescued many of these migrants. They are housed, fed, but they cannot work. Even if they do find ways to earn a living, it could only be transitory and cheap. The onslaught of migrants has been a pressing issue that Italy and most of Europe is confronting on a daily basis. But in recent months, the thorny issue of accommodating the migrants that come in droves from the wartorn areas of Syria, Tunisia, Nigeria, Eritrea, among others has achieved terrifying proportions.

An American blogger has described Genoa as a place that is hostile to running. “Why else run against this stubborn cement? There is no other place in Genoa to run
through. The rest of the city is slanted and hilly. The crushed bricks trap the foot, contort the knee, and injure the ankle. The pathway along the sea is the only solution” (Wozny 3). And so these migrants have turned to the sea. You can see them selling their fake designer handbags and eyewear; some are even energetic enough to break dance, in a sad imitation of Afro-American rappers cruising the streets of Harlem. Some of them have decided to stop running altogether, and have assumed the identity of shadows, lurking in sidewalks and piazzas, selling umbrellas and useless car decals. There’s a line from a song entitled “Via del Campo” (Fabrizio D’Andre), culled from the name of a street that has a “reputation.” It sums the way of survival for some of these young migrant adults, male or female: *ama a ridi se amor risponde / piangi forte se non ti sente / dai diamanti non nasce niente / dal letame nascono i flori* / (laugh and love if love does not answer / cry aloud if it does not hear you / nothing grows out of precious diamonds / out of dung, the flowers do grow). These lives are sucked in prostitution and the drug trade. Various body types and ages prowl through the *la cattiva strada* (the bad street) of many cities in Europe. This is the ongoing narrative of migrants that I have seen.

Ulliano Lucas is a renowned photojournalist whose work was exhibited at Palazzo Ducale at the time of my visit. His photos encapsulate the plight of migrants, but the time frame of the photographs are not even—some were taken in the 1970s, some were taken after the Second World War, while others were taken in the 1980s and 1990s. The skin color of these migrants vary: some of them look Chinese, others are definitely from the Arab states, and a smattering of these photos featured blacks. One photo has captured the squalor of the Southern Italians, a father’s naked loins exposed, while a black, hairy looking pig awaits his company in a makeshift bed. Still another has captured the frenetic quality of squishing one’s luggage in an already cramped train carriage, somehow channeling the horrors of the Holocaust, but not quite. Another shot has a shirtless young man looking out the bus window, the reflection of a white man in a smart three piece suit superimposed on his torso. “E gia, poi noi via di nuovo per il quartiere, a cercare altre tranches de vie, e lei li, con quai figli con le sue angosce, forse piu forti di prima perché ha dovuto parlare e facile risalta e li sulla gellatina della pelicula.” Fishing out some familiar words from a text that it took a while to comprehend, I can understand why Signor Lucas equated the experience of viewing these pictures similar to the gelatinous nature of a film reel, as to how experience, like blood drawn quick, takes a while to coagulate, and perhaps, even heal, as a wound. Migrants do settle in quarters, sometimes in the outskirts, sometimes in the urban pockets, mostly living in squalor.
Lucas’s photographs echo a familiar theme from home. The migrants that came to our country were mixed, and in waves: some were Chinese, a race that is replete with collected narratives of displacement, discrimination, kidnappings, and massacres. Once upon a time they were relegated to only one part of the city of Manila: the *parian* of Binondo. They thrived and survived these efforts to quell their number, perhaps because of their distinct business ethics, one Chinese helps the other, and so on. Today, the Chinese population in the Philippines is no longer the alienated minority. Many of them have become powerful taipans, proprietors of shopping malls, golf parks, amusement centers, real estate, shipping, airlines. To date, most Filipino-Chinese or Tsinoys have integrated themselves well into the fabric of society, and a number of them are wielding their power in politics and civil society.

Another familiar theme of migrants in my country concerns local migrations: during the Spanish colonial era, the indios moved from one pueblo to the other, mostly to escape conscription in forced labor camps, the *polos y servicios*, hunger and famine, and some exoduses were instigated by political exile. In contemporary times, especially with the onslaught of transforming farmlands and ancestral lands into prime real estate or roads, plus the unforeseen effects of natural disasters, the poorer inhabitants from the regions have to settle in the city where economic growth is foreseen. If Philippine literature is a forest, it would be dense with the flora of the local migration narratives, such as those penned by Edgardo M. Reyes like *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag*; or the fiction of Ricardo Lee, Fanny Garcia, Rogelio Sikat; and the haunting songs by the group Patatag, or Joey Ayala.
April 23, 2012

Here in Genoa, I’ve discovered a Filipino quarter located in Via Lomellini. One Sunday morning as I was taking a stroll, I recognized a fellow Filipina. Her name is Amy, and she comes from Isabela, the biggest province in the Cagayan Valley, a region from Northern Philippines. Amy’s face was a mirage. Prior to our meeting, my homesickness was almost unbearable, symptomatic of the immobility experienced by the traveller without any money. Amy trusted me at once, and told me there is a congregation of Filipinos meeting at the corner, on the second floor of the building. True enough, they were there: manongs and manangs, kuyas and ates, most of them domestic workers, some are employed in odd jobs as delivery boys, waiters, nannies. All of them may be garbed for spring, but their skin is definitely brown, their accents are definitely Filipino, and I felt that I have somehow, reached home. It was their place of worship, the Jesus Is Lord movement. Their religion is a countersign, albeit a twin of, the dominant Roman Catholic tradition. Here there are no icons of the Blessed Virgin Mary, nor of Jesus Christ. All they have is their faith, their songs, their unwavering belief in their redemption. Like the Biblical story of the miraculous multiplication of loaves, wine, and fish to feed the crowd, these Filipinos shared their simple feast of familiar home dishes with a stranger like me: sinigang, bulalo, chop suey. They told me that any nationality is welcome in that hall, any race, any color, any occupation. Truly a utopian space in this city. Now that I’ve seen the pictures taken by Ulliano Lucas, I can see a common ground: Lucas’s art may have been taken in Italy’s myriad streets, but it echoes similar images from my Philippine soil. Working class males tired from work walk universally: shoulders hunched, eyes on the walk, burden on the back, those tired looking soles/souls. Even the women who wash their clothes have a similar expression as they hang their garments out in the sun.

Figure 4. Family of three, with laundry. Photo by Ulliano Lucas.

In Graziella Paratti’s article, “The legal side of culture: notes on immigration, laws and literature in contemporary Italy,” she states that the initial autobiographies of immigrants (from the Francophone areas of Morocco, Tunisia, and Senegal) were written in Italian, and not in their native languages. These authors also collaborated with an Italian counterpart, who often served as coauthor or editor of the text. It is interesting to note the absence of Asian voices in these autobiographies. The creation of the Martelli law is the intellectual progenitor of these narratives, and it is interesting how literary texts and legal texts are birthed alongside each other, legitimating and perhaps in a discourse with the other “twin.” It is also noteworthy that the same law, although it attempts to deal with the problem of illegal immigrants also asserts a contradiction: the stranieri as an agent can declare his or her existence as a passive entity that is ‘allowed’ to remain, but he is “locked into a position of passivity” (Paratti 2).
Armando Gnisi contends that these migrant texts offer an "immagini cruciali (dell’Italia) anche da un punto di vista diciamo ‘teorico’, perché ci sono comunicate (da) stranieri che non sono turisti ..." (401), or a fresh look at some imaginative corners that may have been overlooked, not only in the immigrant experience, but in the imagination of Italy and Italians as well. Paratti notes how her own country and fellow Italians have likewise been subject to othering and stereotypes, all strongly informed by "the large corpus of travel literature written by practitioners of the Grand Tour and, in particular, by the picturesque, an aesthetic ideal that flourished in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century" (Ibid.). The Grand Tour is the traditional journey through Europe undertaken by wealthy European young men since the late 1600s. It is "an educational rite of passage aimed at introducing the young traveller to the cultural legacy of classical antiquity and the Renaissance. Italy was a crucial leg of the journey and soon became the favorite country for Grand Tourists, who have provided a plethora of travel accounts of their Italian experiences" (Marchetti 402). These narratives are of a "great theoretical significance" because their depth of field is entirely different from the accounts provided by travellers like Henry James and Goethe.

The "Grand Tour" is evident even in the major works of Filipino authors like Jose Rizal, Amado V. Hernandez, Ninotchka Rosca, and even Miguel Syjuco. This narrative trope usually announces itself in the picturesque mode that is not only "cosmopolitan in character, but incredibly lasting over time." It is, therefore, a powerful and dominant aesthetic reference. However the immigrant narratives also serve as dialogical points that undermine its power and dominance.

Caroline Hau notes in Hernandez’s novel *Mga Ibong Mandaragit* that "Mando could have merely gone abroad to sell Simoun’s jewels and returned immediately to the Philippines. Instead, Hernandez breaks off his narration of the events in the Philippines in the middle of the novel to provide an extended description of Mando’s itinerary, complete with museum trips, sight-seeing excursions, sojourns at the Ritz hotel, a fleeting dalliance with Dolly Montero, the daughter of his employer. Mando’s long trip abroad rounds off his self development as *l’uomo universale*—in keeping with Dr. Sabio’s idea of the intellectual who is also a man of action—through his exposure to other nations, peoples, and conditions, and through his rational study of other cultures and countries. He gains a comparative perspective that allows him to chart his progress and determine the problems of his own country" (Hau 23).

If and when the Filipino immigrant in Italy will write his or her autobiography as a human being in this country, I wonder what legal texts would he or she encounter,
if he or she will remain in that same position, attempting to author one's life, attempting one's mobility? Perhaps, as I am well aware of the existence of some Filipinos who travel all over Europe, and not just Italy, using fake identities, tampering with documents, selling identities like bodies for lost souls, gambling away their future, sometimes forced to sell their house, their land, everything, just to have a chance, another incarnation, in a "kinder" place. And then they end up as domestic workers, waiters, laborers, nannies, even if they have graduated from college, or are overqualified for these odd jobs that spell underemployment. They lap it all up, because the euro is a healthier currency than the peso.

As a city, Genoa has its own share of divided memories. In 2001, the city was a site of G8 protests. These protests have spawned a series of short films that documented the violence that erupted on the streets of Genoa between July 20 and 21 of that year. Carlo Giuliani was a name that echoed that violence, as a casualty of a spectacle that bore "all the key elements of a Hollywood blockbuster: blood, smoke, fire, death" (Niwott 68). Symptomatically divisive, the documentaries that narrated the violence of these G8 protests exhibited divergent, even contradictory texts. Within the actual community of protesters, the filmic renditions portrayed such violence as state-condoned, either through direct involvement or failure to prosecute or to investigate. This was in stark contrast with the documentaries made for an international audience. Seen from outside, the G8 violence was framed within the context of globalization, inside, the violence is seen as cyclical, perennial (Niwott 71).

Although these documentaries shared the same space and the same time, these memories of the 2001 G8 are "often incompatible, but survive in parallel." This is not surprising, actually. Italian history, just like Philippine history, has been marked by divided memories ever since the nation took shape in the nineteenth century (70). This inability to create a consensus about the past is reflected in forms of public memory. Perhaps we can surmise that this inability to remember only one memory can be seen in literary texts as well. There are crevices and complexities to be found in collective memories and experiences, just as there are in individual ones.
Binigyan ako ng pakpak para makarating sa mga lugar na pinapangarap lamang na puntahan ng iba. Maglalakbay ako hindi para kumayod ng pera, kundi upang maranasan ang lahat ng mundo. Ako, na mula sa bayang tinaguriang developing country, o sa mga mas marahas na bersiyon, ikaw, na kayumangging dayo, na mula sa third world. 


Finding Genoa, Finding Myself


"Ako'y nasa Roma! Ang lahat ng niyayapakan ko'y pawang abo ng mga bayani; dito'y nalalanghap ko ang hangin ding nalanghap ng mga bayaning Romano; pinagpupugayan ko nang buong pitagan ang bawat estatwa at tila bago ako — abang naninirahan sa isang pulong maliit — ay nasa isang simbahahan. "Jose Rizal, Roma, ika-27 ng Hunyo 1887

May 1, 2012. Piazza Ferrari. Enjoying my cup of cappuccino, looking out at the crowd. Suddenly, I could hear the familiar sound of people marching. La Communista, the banners said. Here, in this part of the world, déjà vu flits back and forth, back and forth, like a seasonal moth. Back home, probably six or seven hours later, people will march to Mendiola, a familiar square known as a space for protest. Perhaps there will be the usual round of speeches from the various sectors: the farmers and
the fisher-folk, the women and the workers, the youth, the desaparecidos, civil society. The usual demands for higher wages, giving back the land to the poor (a nail on the cross of the current president who happens to be the scion of a rich hacendero family), a protest against the rape of nature by the capitalists, a protest against the shooting of informal settlers who refuse to leave prime land, a protest against rising oil prices and the greed of oil cartels, down with the imperialists, etc., etc. It will probably be a protest rally that is similar to a picnic: crowds do not just flourish on eloquence of political rage alone, they’ll probably consume food too, and you’ll see the citrus colored drinks and coconut thirst quenchers, squid balls and fish balls, frying in the midst of the summer heat. I haven’t taken part in those rallies, not for a long time since my collegiate years when I felt to the fore the weight of my responsibility as an iskolar ng bayan/scholar of the nation/studente delle nacion. Watching the march in Piazza Ferrari, I took some pictures of that crowd, especially as it passed by the statue of Garibaldi, a central figure of the Risorgimento. In my bones I knew, history was ticking. It is not written yet, as the eye who can witness and the hand that can write it are never acting simultaneously, somehow, the eye shall be always be ahead of the hand.

Met Anne McDormind for lunch. Along Via Settembre XX, past the clothing stores and bookshops, there was a sight that I knew I would remember: one, two, three people, kneeling, in the center of the sidewalk, people in their grubbiest best, with a sign that reads: Ho fame. “Bastos ang kahirapan” a familiar line from a poem in Filipino by Benilda Santos, flashed past. “Poverty is rude.” It strips the person of all shame, hunger being the primal force to reckon with. I asked Prof. McDormind if these are common, and she said, their numbers are increasing. Sometimes you can’t tell the real ones, from the scam artists. “You came here at a tough time.” She was telling me that a decade ago, Italy wasn’t like this, and her tone assumed the personality of a concerned caregiver, talking about her beloved patient who suddenly fell ill.

She loves Italy. In her flat, she says the sirocco breeze can be sweet, especially before summer. There’s a radio in the kitchen, an antique model that her husband bought from a neighbor. Only one channel can be listened to, but she doesn’t throw it away, as if it is a memento, as if it is a physical presence left by a loved one. I think identities are similar to antiques or mementoes. We simply cannot throw them away, as they are a part of us. But like their analogues, these identities have been rendered almost useless by time.

Lived time here in Italy is different from home. Before I came here, I’ve imagined this place—Venice in particular—as a site of mossy and damp walls, a dream like
vision with its romantic trips on the gondola, passing the Bridge of Sighs. In Henry James’s *Wings of the Dove*, a wealthy American heiress discovers how superficial some friendships are, how great is the influence and promise of money, both inherited and acquired in marriage, and how hypocritical is the idea of romantic love found in the Grand Tour: the whole idea that a trip to Europe undertaken by the wealthy tourist can introduce him or her to a cultural legacy of classical antiquity and Renaissance. Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* was even bleaker: an old man literally walks into his own death, mesmerized by the charm of a Tadzio that he can’t have. And who could ever forget the whole *Godfather* series by Francis Ford Coppola, from Mario Puzo’s novel. That film replicates itself in memory, inducing blood-curdling and very vulnerable stereotypes of the Mafia. These books, these films, have all replicated and reverberated in my memory, sometimes, as I walk through the streets of Genoa I wonder if one had imagined it all, made it all up, because from what I can see, a different picture emerges.


I found a copy of Elsa Morante's work in, of all places, a community library in the outskirts of Genoa, the Biblioteca Gallino. Upon reading its first few pages, it immediately grabbed my attention. Morante streamlined history with a capital H, culled from history books and newspapers, and divided the plot into the war years and beyond. In her book, a schoolteacher named Ida Mancuso meets Gunther (surname unknown), a Nazi soldier in Rome. It is a fateful meeting, as Mancuso shall be raped by this Aryan youth in search of the solace of home in an unfamiliar land. The rape is described after an interlude that situates Ida's subject position as a schoolteacher, as an epileptic that is ashamed of her illness, as a half-Jew who must keep her origins a secret, and as a woman who has never really plumbed her sexuality, much less has she befriended her own body. Gunther's appearance, although brief, supplies insights on a certain type of masculinity that thrived with the totalitarian notion of Hitler's war: tough and cruel, yet childlike in its innermost recesses. This interlude will birth one of the most charming characters I have ever read in fiction: Useppe.

The reality of war—how the Jews were persecuted, the degradation of life in the air raid shelters among Rome's ruins, how the youth of that generation were corrupted by partisan politics and ideologies—these are all heavy themes and topics, but somehow Morante manages to make the telling more lucid, more startling, because it is told mostly from the viewpoint of the beasts and the children, two entities that have no voice, in war or in peace.


Maaalala ko ang pagtanga ko sa kusinang iyon sa aming flat sa mga dis-oras ng gabi. May nakasalang na labada sa washing machine, at kasabay ng whirr-whirr ng makina’y ang paulit-uitis na tanong—Bakit ko hinayaang mangyari ito sa akin? Nakatitig ako sa mangkok ng kanin at sa tiráng pasta na ilang araw ko na ring pinagtitiyagaang ubusin. Tila inaamag na ang omelette kong palpak ang pagkaluto. Walang laman ang ref kundi tatlong kahel, dalawang yoghurt, isang loaf at dalawang libreng pouch ng

Di hamak na mas bata sa akin ang mga iskolar na nakausap ko. Mga undergraduate student lamang sila na napadpad sa bahaging ito ng Europa dahil sa scholarship ng Erasmus sa larangan ng medisina, social science, at culture studies. Ako pa ang nangahasa na umutang sa kanila ng kaibigan at isang daang euro, para lang may maipantawid. Natatandaan ko pa ang paghihintay ko sa hagdanan sa labing katedral, kung saan kami magtatagpo ng kapuwa ko Filipino. Maraming mga kalapati na dumarap na sa mga natutukang mga natutukang mga tina-tinapay at prutas, mukhang maaamo dahil panay ang dapot sa iyong tabi, ngunit mailap pala.

**EPILOGUE**

The Russian Formalists gave the literary world a legacy to analyze any story with: the *fabula*, the *sjuzet*, and the *forma*. Theme, discourse, and genre. Fabula is timeless, mythic, the anatomy of the story that plumbs into “human jealousy, authority and obedience, thwarted ambition, and those other plights that lay claim to human universality” (Bruner 696). The fabula in my personal narrative of mobility here in Genoa is indeed fraught with these timeless and mythic human conditions. Not used to the cold weather of spring and the exactitude of train and bus routes, I was thrown into the company of a fellow Asian whom I assumed could be my friend in this foreign land, drunk perhaps with the myth of exotic Asian loyalty that runs
universal in those regions. Instead I came face to face with a coldness that was so unfamiliar because I associated it with the stereotype of narcissistic white people who, in my mind, didn’t really care much about the condition of others and whose mean spiritedness was masked in beguiling smiles. (How narrow-minded, how racist of me.) The sjuzet took the form of patiently waiting for the arrival of the scholarship, so that we may then begin the travel. Plot sequenced by the arrival and departure of days, the thinning of our wallets, the hunger pangs in lunches we decided to skip, the decision of the other to travel alone, the other one left behind, the recognition that one must ask for help, and finally, the arrival of the stipend. The plot could have been more interesting had there been an occasion to work, perhaps, as a bagger, or as a receptionist, or a nanny, or a dogwatcher. It’s honest labor, better than asking money from strangers that you have to consider as friends. Better than compromising one’s honor and self-image. It is a tale that is so ordinary, one may shrug it off as a normal existence of a scholar with Asian origins who took the challenge to study and learn in Europe. And wasn’t it wonderful, inspite of the bittersweet aftertaste, what epiphanies have been formed from its ordinariness, in this mundane existence of a Filipina professor who once went here in Genoa, to study, and to learn. And boy, she did.

Figure 7. Rooftop view in Florence. Photo by Luna Sicat Cleto.
ENDNOTE

1 Any published material from the local government. As an institution the zemstvo had its roots during the “great liberal reform” under Imperial Russia, during the reign of Alexander II. As a self-governance unit, it was powerful in the sense that it had the ability to give representation to all classes of society, and it can respond to a variety of issues like taxation, education, healthcare, etc. It was also a hotbed of provincial intelligentsia and played a key role in producing prominent activists.

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Luna Sicat Cleto, Ph.D. <lunacycut@yahoo.com> is a professor of Malikhaing Pagsulat (Creative Writing) at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She has written two novels, Makinilyang Altar (2003) and Prodigal (2010).