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AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR LITERARY SCENE IN 2011

Gémino H. Abad

What is a “literary work”?

Anything *literary*—poetry, fiction, play, essay—is wrought *from* language; “wrought,” the past tense 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,” from Greek *poiein*, “to make,” as 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, a work of imagination, even as language itself, ceaselessly reinvented, and its script are the finest invention of the human imagination. It may be that onomatopoeia, the mimesis of the sounds of nature and human situations, is the origin and fount of language and writing.

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. I have always been struck by what Eduardo Galeano says of memory: “to remember,” he says, is in Spanish, “recordar,” which derives from Latin, “recordis,” that is, “to pass through the heart.”¹ For the heart’s memory is the profoundest, that which has most stirred one’s whole being. Similarly, the etymology of “experience” from both Latin (*experiri*) and Greek (*enpeiran*) spells the very nature of all our living, for it denotes all the meaningfulness of our human condition: “to undergo or pass through, to try or attempt (hence, the English ‘experiment’ and ‘trial’), to fare or go on a journey, to meet with chance and danger, for nothing is certain.”

We consider the author's work 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 what the philosopher Albert Camus says about style or the writer's way with language: that it brings about "the simultaneous existence of reality and the mind that gives reality its form."² 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. In short, we consider the literary work as work (labor) of art. Only then, I should think, might we consider other factors or forces that made it possible or that might elucidate certain aspects of its nature other than its *literariness*; such other factors as the author's own life or experience (we would of course have to examine all his works), his psychology, 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 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).

The literary work as work of language and imagination 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.

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," *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."³

In sum: whatever the literary work's *paksa* (subject or theme), it is the work's *saysay* (point, significance, meaningfulness) and *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.

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. 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.”⁴ 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. That universal plane isn’t the realm of eternal verities, only the site of everlasting questioning.

The “best among the best” in *Likhaan 6*

My calling is poetry—that is, only if anyone might presumptuously claim from the Muse what truly cannot be anyone’s possession in that “craft or sullen art.” I beg then my reader’s indulgence for my remarks on the poetry wrought from English that, for embarrassment of riches, could not all be accommodated in *Likhaan 6*. There are quite a number of remarkable poems that I personally would not hesitate to include in an update of *A Habit of Shores* should I venture again into those woods “lovely, dark and deep”; for instances, each one for wholeness perfectly chiseled—Jov Almero’s “palindrome”; Miro Capili’s “Monet’s Last Yellow”; F. Jordan Carnice’s “Relativities”; Albert B. Casuga’s “Graffiti: Five Lenten Poems”; Nolin Adrian de Pedro’s “caxton”; Vincent Dioquino’s “candescence”; Jan Brandon Dollente’s “When I say the sky opens its mouth”; Eva Gubat’s “A Telling of Loss”; Pauline Lacanilao’s “A Crowded Bus Stops Abruptly”; Christine V. Lao’s “Swatches”; R. Torres Pandan’s “Remembering Our Future”; Trish Shishikura’s, “The Manner of Living”; Jaime Oscar M. Salazar’s “Clinch”; Arlene Yandug’s “Aporia.” There are poems, too, that taking after other poets’ works and poems, are informed by wit and satire: Anne Carly Abad’s “How the world got owned”; Jasmine Nikki Paredes’s “This Poem Is a Mouth”; and Vyxz Vasquez’s “Epal.” I might illustrate further with some striking passages: from Pauline Lacanilao’s “Love Language”—

If I ever learn the name
of the moment after prayer

when the Amen sheathes its blade
but the hilt of want still glints,

I will call my child the same.

Or from Eva Gubat's "Eurydice, Rebooted"—

No need for saving.
She will burn
any stranger's
rope ladder
hanging
deliciously
from
earth's
tongue.

Or from Miro Capili's "Overture to a disturbance"—

A house dreams of its rooms.
The frame of a window yearns
for a view of what extends it.

Likewise, as regards the fiction and nonfiction in English, and all the works in Filipino, we have reaped a bountiful harvest. As editor I have relied on my associates for their judgment. I am most grateful to them and to all our reviewers who have been a great help in the final, objective-subjective selection of the works for *Likhaan 6*. While I am not at liberty to reveal our reviewers' identities, I might draw from their commentaries which exemplify, I should think, the standards and tastes of the contemporary critic-reader of our literature in both English and Filipino. Their comments may also spur more and ever finer writing. (For brevity, but without losing their sense, I have edited their comments.)

As regards first the poetry in English, one reviewer, in choosing eight from "the crop" (seventy-two poetry collections of "generally fine quality," says this reviewer), preferred poems that are "aware of the Filipino experience, yet also conscious of poetry as the most *potent* use of language [so that] each word or image, each poem as a whole, pulsates with a certain force because it has been 'made' (undergone *poiesis*) into a thing of beauty and meaning."

This reviewer chose “Sea Stories,” “Akin to Feeling,” “Parameters,” “Grafitti: Five Lenten Poems,” “In Lieu of the Visible,” “This Poem Is a Mouth,” “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas’s Cookbook,” and “In the Garden.” The other reviewer also clarifies a personal view:

I like a poem that is at home in the world, in this century, and perceivable by the human senses, not one that denies meaning, sensibility, or “reality as we know it.” If there is a delay in meaning, it is intentional, and there is a perceivable reward for such a tactic. Such a poem has respect for a reader who is addressed or is allowed to overhear the speaker’s thoughts. Such a poem has urgency in what is uttered. It shows a discipline with thought and language . . . I praise the poet’s individual vision, but I also value his/her resonance with tradition. The poem (and poet) is part of something larger and something older.

This reviewer comments in detail on individual poems from each of five chosen poetry collections: “Parameters,” “Stretch,” an untitled collection that began with “Angle Mort,” “Akin to Feeling,” and “The Difference between Abundance and Grace.”

The final poetry selection limited each poetry collection to four/five poems. The subject of Merlie M. Alunan’s poems (here only part of a series called “Sea Stories”) is “unmistakable in its immediacy, very ‘real’ in its myth-making, and effective in its ‘aesthetic of catastrophe’.” In Joel M. Toledo’s poems (likewise, only part of a suite called “Parameters”) the cycle—say, from “Om” to “Oath,” as preferred by one reviewer—resounds the “wonder of language and the world,” and finally, in “Oath,” there is a “‘letting go of all useless, unnecessary fury’ without being weak but ready ‘to face mercy, confront frailty.’” Isabela Banzon’s poems (in a series called “Stretch”) sometimes “seem undisciplined with their uneven lines but, when read aloud, they have a strange, rhythmic regularity; they’re like a song list for Balikbayan Videoke, but the language and poetic structure refuse to let the poem fall into melodrama.” Alfred A. Yuson’s lyric suite, “Being One,” is (to adopt his own words) a “double-edged sword [of] an antic mind” that celebrates a “moral order of aesthetics” where:

Equipoise of execution
Is all that’s needed

for a crossover above rivers
of demarcation, between nations
and genders. Toss in genres.

And certainly not the least are Mookie Katigbak's "Four Poems," for they are perfectly chiseled "in the puzzle's core": heart's weather and mind's "lit equations/of faiths we keep untrue for."

For all the works wrought from Filipino, I relied on our reviewers and on National Artist for Literature Virgilio S. Almario. There were fifty-one poetry collections; of these, four were among seven finalists in our reviewers' list. The poems by Enrique Villasis, Charles Bonoan Tuvilla, Edgar Calabia Samar, and Michael M. Coroza "ably represent," says Almario "the most recent thematic pursuits and the corresponding experimental poetic expressions in Filipino. The poets invariably display a high degree of mastery of modern Filipino, even while using the traditional *tugma't sukat* or carving new forms in free verse, and disciplining the language according to their various chosen ideological missions."

In regard to fiction in English (fifty-nine short stories), one reviewer selected eight; other than those finally selected, among these eight (including the reviewer's digest of the story) are: "Sugar and Sweetness" (a gay couple undergoes "the same struggle as other couples having to 'come to terms with the brevity of things'"); "The Outsiders" (a community's "concerted effort" against new arrivals who bring changes forces it to grapple with its "uneasy collective conscience"); "Ecstasy at Barranca, a Tale of the Baroque" (a family rivalry set against the backdrop of their town's religious tradition); "Still Life" ("the persona's world ends when her son gets lost," but when the Rapture occurs, "she meets in the empty 'new world' a young man who inspires her to again be the dancer she used to be; however, he too turns into dust, leaving her to declare the world's end a second time"); and "Laws of Stone" ("a fantasy revolving around a quest, its world-building done with care; plot-driven, with well-drawn characters"). The other reviewer chose six, among them: "The Outsiders"; "The New Daughter" ("an interesting sequel to the Pinocchio tale"); "The Room by the Kitchen" ("a domestic helper in Singapore gradually becomes a surrogate mother to an 8-year-old girl whose parents are too busy"); and "The Photographer of Dupont Circle" ("the intricacies in the relationship of a Filipino and his American boyfriend, a professional photographer; when the latter exhibits his photographs of poverty and squalor in the Philippines, the Filipino then retaliates, which makes for a thought-provoking ending").

Four stories were finally chosen. In Jenette N. Vizcocho's "What They Remember," there are, says one reviewer, "two lives that intersect, both grappling with loss of memory and its retrieval; the significant details are palpable, and the characters, carefully drawn, are sympathetic." The

characters' "pain is all the more poignant for having been suppressed for so long," says associate editor Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo; for one character, the pain "finds expression, perverse though it might be; for the other, there may be "release from her self-imposed exile, as she 'stares at her cell phone's screen and its blinking cursor.'" Angelo Lacuesta's "Siren" is "focused," says Hidalgo, "on a dysfunctional family, seen through the eyes of a child. But at the heart of the story is injustice, here made almost sinister by a total lack of remorse." It is, says one reviewer, a "deceptively straightforward narrative of a domestic helper suspected of stealing a piece of jewelry; irony is achieved through the effective use of the daughter's (the culprit's) point of view." Hammed Bolotaolo's "The Old Man and His False Teeth" is, says Hidalgo, "a wildly romantic tale set in a Manila rendered unfamiliar—yet eerily recognizable—by an immense flood, and built around a most unlikely love token: a set of ill-fitting false teeth." It is, says one reviewer, "a story within a story within still another story: an old man tells a young boy how he courted and married a girl who later gifts him with the false teeth he lovingly, meticulously cleans every day but never uses; he risks his life to recover it, disappears, and becomes an urban legend." As regards John Bengan's "Armor," I combine both reviewers' comments: it narrates "the transformation from self-absorbed to sympathetic character of a gay, small-time drug-dealer who knows the syndicate will hit him; he attempts to win a beauty pageant by fashioning a unique gown with an 'armored' sleeve which actually makes him vulnerable; at the story's end, he tries to save his young assistant who crafted his armor." It is "as romantic in its way" as Bolotaolo's narrative, says Hidalgo, "but even stranger elements have been tossed into the brew: drug dealers and death squads; a door-to-door beauty stylist who sometimes choreographs intermission dance numbers for government employees; *ukay-ukay* and a gay pageant held every year in Mintal on the eve of our Lady of the Immaculate Conception's Day, the town's patron saint." (Only "Armor" and "The Outsider" are among both story reviewers' choices.)

The fiction in Filipino numbered twenty-five. Says one reviewer: "Sa aking palagay, ang maikling kuwento ang prosang nalalapit sa tula sa puntong nangangailangan ito ng mga salitang may presisyon upang makapagpahayag ng damdamin (at ideang) ipahayag sa pinakamaikling maaaring paraan." This reviewer chose three of which two were finally chosen: the third one is "Ang Baysanan," a chapter from a novel, of which the reviewer says: "Matingkad ang kulay [ng kuwento] na sapat na nagpapakita ng pumupusyaw nang tradisyon." The other reviewer chose eight: among them, "Kung Bakit Hindi

Ako Katoliko Sarado” (“a complex but likeable persona’s observations show his understanding of the ‘mysterious’ world of religion and seminary life”); “Sa Sinapupunang Digmaan” (“a moving story about war and its effects on the characters, especially the two children”); “Physica Curiosa” (“a laudable exploration of the mysteries of existence and the world of science in a context of lies fabricated by a ruling system”); “Birhen” (“a highly controlled series of lively encounters between a GRO and a geek where the ‘prostitute with the golden heart’ is given a more contemporary ‘take’ without mawkishness”); and “Ang Baysanan” (“a ‘traditional’ story which shows an extraordinary mastery of Filipino and traditional poetry”).

The final fiction selection comprise Mixkaela Villalon’s “Gitnang Araw” (“its language is powerful, the insights deep, and the deployment of graphic details impressive; its delineation of character is remarkable, and its dominant tone effective in creating a rich meaningfulness”); Joselito D. delos Reyes’s “Troya” (“the principal character and his antagonist are clearly delineated; apart from the story’s humor, the mayhem after a natural calamity and the frenetic activities leading to the story’s end are well recreated”); and Carlo Pacolor Garcia’s “Ang Batang Gustong Maging Ipis” (“a story simply but powerfully told, the narrative lines spare and uncluttered”). National Artist Almario says that these three stories are among “more than ten exemplary entries in Filipino. ‘Gitnang Araw’ is remarkable for its consistent tone which is effectively employed to create a rich series of meanings. ‘Troya’ uses humor as an integral part of its highly political allegory. In contrast, Garcia’s story takes on the guise, as it were, of a child’s story but is nonetheless as powerful and interesting a read.” All three stories are among both story reviewers’ choices.

As to nonfiction in English (in all, seventeen essays), one reviewer chose eight, and the other, five; among these essays—other than those finally selected—both reviewers selected (and so, I have combined their brief comments): “How To Play the Violin” (“an intimate and lyrical statement of the author’s artistic creed, it is well-structured and deftly nuanced in its choice of incidents and tones”); and “To My Granddaughter on Christmas Eve” (“the concern over a granddaughter’s future in the grandmother’s letter is candid, eloquent, and touching”). Also selected by the first reviewer are: “The Old Man” (“a heart-tugging memoir about the author’s father rises to a universal truth about the complexity of father-child relationships”) and “A Dead Man’s Society” (“a character profile of Rizal that brings him back to life and makes him reachable as our neighbor”). The second reviewer

added “Dao” (the author remembers “the houses his family lived in since his childhood and reflects on his own life experiences and how familial ties are forged and homes built”).

The four nonfiction works selected—Merlie M. Alunan’s “The Last Gesture,” Vicente Garcia Groyon’s “Traversing Fiction and Nonfiction in Travel Writing,” Jeena Rani Marquez’s “A River of Gold,” and the essays of Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas—are also among both essay reviewers’ choices; hence, I have combined their comments. Alunan’s essay is “a long, hard, disturbing look at motherhood; very well written in a quiet, seemingly matter-of-fact narrative tone which makes it all the more poignant, where ‘the last gesture’ is letting go the children now all grown up.” Hidalgo also notes that the essay “is a memoir of motherhood—the physical experience, of it, the incessant demands it imposes, the gravity of the commitment, its ultimate solitariness—with an unflinching candor rare in the personal narratives of Filipino women writers, a candor both surprising and deeply moving.” Groyon’s essay, “beautifully written, is an honest, self-aware, unflinching look at the creative process in nonfiction; it deals with the issue of the blurring boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Its ostensible subject is the author’s trip to Spain to retrace a Spanish poet’s travels there—this by a fictionist who has never written a travel essay nor has ever been to Spain nor speaks her language, but feels obliged to filter Spain through a former colonial subject’s eyes.” Hidalgo notes “the dry, self-deprecating humor” in Groyon’s travel essay; when asked to explain why he accepted the assignment from the Instituto Cervantes to retrace the Spanish poet Miguel Hernández’s travels in Spain, he said: “I accepted the task with a degree of cockiness, believing, with my fiction writer’s bias, that if one can write a decent story, then one can write anything.” Marquez’s essay, which won the second prize in the 2011 Palanca, is “a biography of Cagayan de Oro where historical events are interspersed with personal/family vignettes.” For Hidalgo, the same essay is “a moving piece about growing up in Cagayan de Oro and learning—sometimes at great cost—the many nuances of identity, family, friendship and community.” Tiempo-Torrevillas’s series of *feuilletons* is a “lighthearted take on obsessive-compulsive disorder which combines smart sophistication with wistfulness, humor with serious musing; it shows the range of the disorder through illustrations and anecdotes, and attributes it to the need to impose order on an unpredictable world.” For Hidalgo, the *feuilletons* are “part memoir and part meditations on a variety of things—dreams, television cooking shows, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and ‘moments of unexpected sweetness’ which read like a prose poem.”

None of the critical essays (eight in English, three in Filipino) and six nonfiction pieces in Filipino passed.

As regards the interviews, National Artist Almario notes that Rogelio G. Mangahas is one of the triumvirate of poets in the '60s [the other two are Rio Alma and Lamberto E. Antonio] who spearheaded the second wave of Modernismo through the literary magazine, *Dawn*, of the University of the East. Louie Jon A. Sanchez and Giancarlo Lauro C. Abrahan in their interview-essay explore the three periods—*pagbabalik-tanaw*, *pangangahas*, and *pagkamalay*—in Mangahas's writing life where the poet bore "great difficulties and personal sacrifices [in breaking] away from the dominant and popular tradition in native Philippine literatures." Ronald Baytan's essay, "Intensities of Signs," is an excellent introduction to Cirilo F. Bautista; the interview which follows reveals Bautista's views on language, the craft of poetry, and the influences on his works by focusing on Bautista's oeuvres—his poetry in English and Filipino, especially his epic poem, *The Trilogy of Saint Lazarus*; his fiction in English and Filipino; and his translation of Amado V. Hernandez.

The annotated select Bibliography of literary works in English by Camille Dela Rosa and in Filipino by Jayson Petras is indisputable witness to the vigor and riches of our national literature.

I cannot end this introduction to "the best among the best" literary works without grateful acknowledgement of the generosity of spirit, cheer and industry of my associate editors, National Artist Virgilio S. Almario and Professor emeritus Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo; our anonymous reviewers in English and Filipino; our indefatigable managing editor, Prof. Ruth Jordana L. Pison, and publication assistant, Anna Sanchez; Dr. Leo Abaya for the *Likhaan 6* cover; and the diligent staffs at the UP Press (Zenaida N. Ebalan, Grace Bengco, and Arvin Abejo Mangohig) and the Institute of Creative Writing (Eva Garcia-Cadiz, Gloria C. Evangelista, and Pablo C. Reyes).

Endnotes

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

2. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert_Camus). I came fortuitously upon this quote as I sought my source in Camus for his remark on style.

3. In Coetzee's novel, *Summertime* (Penguin Books, 2009): 61.

4. William H. Gass, *Habitations of the Word Essays* (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1986).