

The Creative Writing Workshop: Some (Provisional) Aphorisms¹

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THE JOURNEY OF art is the journey from the real to the true.

As Louise Gluck presciently intuits, the limit of what is real is what can be experienced; the limit of what is true is what can be imagined.

Writing, art, is about the business of what's possible, which can be anything, as far as the imagination is concerned.

Both reality and truth need to exist—need to be performed—in the text.

In between the origin (reality) and the destination (truth) are decisions that the writer will need to make.

My task in this workshop is to thoughtfully consider these decisions, in light of both the experience being represented, and the illumination of it that's being proposed.

1. Read by the author at the 57th University of the Philippines National Writers Workshop, AIM Igorot Lodge, Camp John Hay, Baguio City, April 2, 2018.

You may call this task an especially “readerly” one.

Which means: I am here to be a reader, albeit one who also writes.

I am supposed to have read and written more than you. This is a supposition that may or may not be true.

At the very least you can say that I have read and written enough to be able to offer sympathetic feedback.

This sympathy emerges out of a well-meaning hypothesis: that I can speculate rationally—going by the evidence of your work—about what your ambition or “project” in this particular instance may have been.

After the speculative, the next task involves simple observation: I describe the achievement of the text against the vision of what I believe it would have wanted to be.

The closer the gap between the two, the gladder I feel, for both you (for succeeding in your ambition) and for myself (for having had the good fortune of bearing witness to it).

Finally, some cautionary words, not necessarily about writing—which does take care of itself, after a while—but about life, and its unfinished business of happiness.

It’s about these things that I believe we occasionally need some guidance or help.

One of my favorite theorists is the infuriatingly difficult Theodor W. Adorno, who despaired about what he called capitalism’s “instrumental logic.”

Adorno believed that capitalist instrumentality has reduced everything, including even the most cherished forms of human individuality—like art—to its fungible, or “market,” value.

Adorno was a member of the Frankfurt School, and so professed a kind of Marxist disenchantment. But his last work was on aesthetics, in which he attempted to be hopeful. In it he proposed that art’s formal autonomy is the last possible bastion for human agency.

He'd been taking composition classes under the avant-garde musician, Alban Berg, where he arguably picked up enough modicums of this hope. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is the thickest of his numerous books, and up to now nobody has been able to make full sense of it.

My favorite Adorno book is his collection of disjointed "proverbs," *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*.

Here is my favorite quote from this book:

"He who says he is happy lies, and in invoking happiness, sins against it. He alone keeps faith who says: I was happy. The only relation of consciousness to happiness is gratitude, in which lies its incomparable dignity."

What this quote means, to me, is that happiness is something that happens to us after the fact, and we can only look back with gratitude on it—we can only realize we were happy in hindsight.

For example: my childhood may not have really been as beautiful or as magical as I remember it to be, but looking back now I can gratefully say I was happy.

In other words, we're never truly happy in the moment because we're simply too busy living it.

Happiness is nothing if not nostalgia, nothing if not gratitude.

What does this mean, in practical terms? Simple, I guess: we must make as many memories as we can, for who knows, we might just discover that they're happy memories, after all, sometime in the unforeseeable future.

The point is that happiness catches us by surprise. Which is why it is received with gratitude, because what it finally is *is* a gift.

Precisely for this reason, we must not be afraid to love—and to lose—for only this way can we make the memories for which we shall someday give thanks.

All things mortal are fated to end, and our happiness exists despite or precisely because it is bounded by sweet and perishable time.

This quote from Adorno also bids me to count my blessings. Just now two come to mind: my writing and my religious life. Both are inherently difficult to explain, for they do in fact slip and shimmer into each other.

When and how did I first realize that I wanted to write?

I suppose I've always had a knack for words. I liked words. I liked saying them, memorizing them. In high school, I compiled a dictionary of my own—just typewritten words and their definitions culled from the encyclopedic dictionaries that we had in our house. I bound and sewed it myself.

If you want a specific memory of when I first realized my vocation I'd say it happened one morning. I was around six or seven years old.

My siblings had gone to school, and there I was, sitting on one of the swings in our yard. I remember I was alone, as usual. Somehow or other I was suddenly awakened to the truth of the world around me.

It was like my senses had opened for the first time, and I was simply in awe of everything that I saw, heard, and felt: the sunlight, the trees, the rooftops, the sound of dogs barking next door, the swing's squeaky hinges, my legs scissoring the supple air, birds gossiping among the fretwork of branches overhead ...

And then, just as quickly as this realization dawned on me, I wanted to speak them all: all these radiant and lovely presences and things. I wanted to capture them all in the words I didn't yet have.

This yearning to possess the world through language was so pure and so powerful that before I knew it my body had broken into a kind of rhythm or music I hadn't heard before: I hummed.

Picture a lonely little boy on a rusty old swing, humming out his heart to the world that, for the first time it seemed, by turns ravished and quickened it.

That is how and where and what I still am, I suppose, each and every time I write. I write because I am enraptured.

For me writing, like all art, is the opposite of habit. Life's bracing freshness—its realness—is blurred and blunted by familiarity, which exiles us from the essence of experience.

Simply put: habit dulls our senses and prevents us from appreciating and *fully being* in the world.

By contrast children, who are not yet creatures of habit, easily get excited by the simplest of things—the sound of rain, the puddles it leaves behind, chocolate-flavored anything, the feel of pebbles under one's slipperless feet ...

The writer's task, then, is essentially regressive: to imaginatively bring about a return to childhood.

The writer seeks, through her words, to recover the clarity and openness of childhood's eyes, to regain the sharpness of childhood's perceptions.

In other words: the writer seeks to part the numbing veils of habit, seeks to disrupt the humdrum, insincere, meretricious, and prosaic sounds of our workaday world, so that we may see, so that we may hear—so that we may live—life with renewed receptivity and gratitude.

As we've previously surmised, gratitude is probably the same thing as happiness.

The purpose of literature—of art—is to enliven and render vivid again the sensations and dreams with which our bodies have always nourished us.

Literature gives us back the world.

Which is another way of saying: literature gives us back to the world.

And, again, we can only be grateful.