

Merlie M. Alunan: The Filipino Writer as Bisaya

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ON MAY 1983, Merlie M. Alunan arrived in Ormoc City from Cebu after years of living in, as she writes in “The Last Stop,” “an unfinished structure, all raw concrete, crumbling walls of hollow blocks, floors of rough cement, no ceilings, no window shutters, no doors, no kitchen.” It was a bleak image of a marriage gone sour. As she writes in “Poetry as Survival,” “I had broken up my home in Cebu City.... We had become what sociologists and psychologists call a dysfunctional family. Dysfunctional or not, one cannot put aside the fundamental needs of the growing children. I had to cope with that alone. I had no chance to brood on being broken or that my household goods were scattered all over the islands of the Visayas.”

In June of the same year, she was hired at the University of the Philippines in the Visayas-Tacloban College, and thus, “begun [her] uneasy life in Tacloban.” She describes the Tacloban of ’83 as “not a place for a woman alone, especially a woman of my age.” Leaving a marriage that “did not survive the tenth year,” she felt unsure of her place in this new, unfamiliar city, compared to all the women around who were “safely married.”

It was in the solitude of her life in the UPTC Guesthouse where she found herself reading and writing poetry. “I earned my peace that way, and in the stillness, I heard the words clearer, the voices, the rhythms and patterns they created.... Without a

household to care for, without the children to demand my attention, I had too much time in my hands, too easy to go mad. So I wrote. The words named my monsters—anger, loneliness, fear. Once named, they lost their power.” She is speaking here of her first two years at the UPVTC. Her five children, she reveals in “Seasons of a Poem,” stayed with their grandparents in Ormoc City “110 kilometers away in the western coast of Leyte,” which she “saw only on weekends.” In the same essay, Alunan reflects, “it was an odd time to begin writing poetry.... Midlife was hardly the time to get started on the ‘frivolity’ of writing.” She was in her fortieth year, and at around this time, she had also been dreaming of a monkey child who kept on following her. Her mentor, Edith L. Tiempo, interpreted the dream for her. “That’s your creative life,” Edith told her. “It is misshapen for you have not embraced it.”

As she was just discovering her poetic voice, Alunan, together with Waray literature scholar and poet, Victor N. Sugbo, and literary critic, David Genotiva, held the first Creative Writing Workshop at the UPVTC as early as 1982. All three are products of the Silliman National Writers Workshop. Alunan, at the time, was also already a recipient of a writing fellowship from the UP Creative Writing Center. Poets from the grassroots—one of them even illiterate so that he asks his son to write down his poems for him, and all of them participants in the DYVL Aksyon Radyo’s *Puplonganon* contest—were the workshop participants. “We learned our poetics from western models and were deplorably ignorant of the social and aesthetic background against which our participants were writing,” she assessed this conflicting situation in “The Poem Back in the Tongue, The Song Back in the Throat.”

“I am sure now we puzzled them as their poems puzzled us. Nevertheless, they stayed and listened and argued with us good-naturedly. In hindsight, I cringe to remember our mutual frustration. There was no way we could have understood each other—we were talking from our abstruse university-oriented paradigms, they listened with ears tuned by the earthy culture of their rural background.”

Three years later, in 1985, Merlie M. Alunan received a Faculty fellowship from the University of the Philippines to pursue her PhD in Literature at Silliman. “In any case,” she writes, “I had to come back to Tacloban City, to the fold of UP Tacloban College, and finally to this little house at the dead end of Caibaan Road.”

It was during these years when her poetry started receiving recognition from prestigious award-giving bodies. In 1988, she won first prize in the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature for her collection of poems entitled *Poems for Amina*. In 1991, upon her return at the UPVTC after her studies at Silliman, she won second prize in the Palanca for her *Poems of a Season*. These poems became what was to be her first book of poetry, *Hearthstone, Sacred Tree*, published by Anvil in 1993. Edith

Tiempo (1993) commends her poems in this collection as possessing “a distinctive artistic perception, where darkness is awareness that is often tragic and poignant and preternatural in its knowing, where darkness is one’s truth and one’s becoming.” The following year, she won another Palanca first prize for a sheaf of poems titled *Dream of the Blue Gypsy*. In 1994, she won a *Philippines Free Press* Literary Award for her poem entitled “Baguio, the Last Day.” In 1995, she got a *Philippines Free Press* Literary Award for her poem “Letter to Amina who must surely be among the angels.” The poem was later revised and used as the title of her second poetry collection, *Amina Among the Angels*, published by the University of the Philippines Press in 1997, the same year she received the Gawad Alagad ni Balagtas, a lifetime achievement award in literature from the Unyon ng Manunulat ng Pilipinas (UMPIL) and a Lilian Jerome Thornton Award for Poetry, an international poetry prize.

Alunan won three literary prizes in 1995 alone: a third prize Palanca, a *Free Press* prize, and a *Homelife* Poetry Prize, a contest directed by award-winning fictionist, Leoncio Deriada, who was then literary editor of *Homelife* magazine. Years later, in 2004, she was to bag the first prize of the Homelife Centennial Prize for Poetry. Because of her exemplary creative work, the University of the Philippines bestowed on her the Chancellor’s Award for Creative Work in 1996. Two years later, she received a nomination for the National Book Award from the Manila Critics Circle for her second poetry collection, *Amina Among the Angels*. In 1999, she received another nomination for the same award for her anthology, *Fern Garden: Anthology of Women Writing in the South*.

In 2000, just when the millennium was about to end, she held residencies and distinguished lectureships at the National University of Singapore and the University of Sains in Penang, Malaysia, the latter being under a grant from the Asia Universities Network (AUN).

These were very fruitful years for Alunan. Her decision to commit to the creative life was paying off. She sums up the more than ten years of vigorous literary production in an understatement: “gaining moderate success as a writer in English.” Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo in *Six Sketches* (2011) observes Alunan’s self-effacing manner and adds that “In fact, the name she has made for herself is not at all small.”

A hiatus in Alunan’s literary publication from 1997 to 2009 is only interrupted by her *Selected Poems* in 2004, one of the many publications under the UP Jubilee Student Edition. The book contains poems culled from her two poetry collections, *Hearthstone*, *Sacred Tree* and *Amina Among the Angels*, which were by then out of print since they first came off the press. The book, thus, does not contain any new work. But in 2010, her *Tales of the Spiderwoman*, was released by the University of

Santo Tomas Press. The collection includes poems that won first prize in the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in the same year. In 2010, she also received the Ananda Coomaraswamy Fellowship in Literature from the Sahitya Akademi, through which she lectured in several universities in India. In recognition of her lifework, she was awarded the Sunthorn Phu Award from the Thai Ministry of Culture in 2013, the Ani ng Dangal from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts in 2014, and the Kampeon ng Wika from the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino in 2015. Her most recent poetry collection, *Running With Ghosts* (Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2017) won her the National Book Award for Poetry in 2018.

Without doubt, Alunan has cleared an indisputable place for herself in Philippine literature. Yet her reputation proceeds from more than just being a writer in English. She is also known for advocating the use of the native language for literary purposes. She did for Waray literature what Leoncio Deriada did for Western Visayas literature, and Resil Mojares and Erlinda Alburo, for Cebuano Literature: revitalize the local language by encouraging writers to use them for creative expression. “For the literary use of the language refreshes the language,” she writes in “Saving a Language through Literature.” And she adds, “It puts it beyond the pale of ordinariness, redeems us from the triteness and cliché. Literature keeps the words alive and preserves them within the locus of the culture. Above all, it restores the language among the sources of our pride, especially for those of us here in the region.”

Alunan, however, is not just a mentor of writers in the mother tongue. She is also an example of writing in the first language. She won a first prize in the Palanca for a short story in Cebuano in 2007, received a *Gawad Komisyon para sa Tula* for her Cebuano poetry from the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino in the same year, and published a collection of Cebuano poetry titled *Pagdakop sa Bulalakaw ug uban pang mga balak* (*To Catch a Firebird and other poems*) published by the Ateneo Press in 2012. Her poetry in Cebuano, like her poetry in English, is well-received. Her pursuit for a more authentic expression of poetic insight culminates in her return to her mother tongue, the language which has become very familiar to her: Cebuano. Her 2014 lecture in Silliman University’s Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center was thus aptly entitled “Balik sa Atong Dila” (Return to Our Language). This has been the theme of her work in the Visayas, particularly Waray literature, since that first fumbling workshop in 1982.

SATURATION OF PLACE

Alunan’s thought on a “southern consciousness” permeating the works of writers in the Visayas and Mindanao finds its first articulation in her master’s thesis in Silliman

University titled “The Transformation of Setting into Character.” A shorter version of this thesis was published in the October 1975 issue of the *Divine Word College of Tagbilaran Journal* with the title “Language as Setting: James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.” Commenting on the Joycean propensity for place, she asserts: “Language brings together the many intersecting threads of environment—the social, the intellectual, the religious, the physical terrain of home and family and all their essential and emotional implication—into the terrain of the mind ... for it is the aural integrity of setting acting at once as medium and end of the communication process that completes and unifies the forces of setting into one.” For Alunan, place, “as the locus of experience, shapes the artist’s point of view.” Joyce’s deployment of language to create and reimagine Dublin in his novels demonstrates this fictional act of place-making.

In the essay, “A Lizard’s Tale/ Tail,” she deals at length with the issue of language as central to the construction of place. “It was a strange way to grow up,” she recounts, “learning the world in the words of my ancestors, and learning it at the same time in a strange new language that did not belong to that old river, and the farmland, and the animals, and the people I lived with, and our whole way of life.” She adds: “It’s hard to say which was the more potent taxonomy and identity base—place or language. I suspect it is language, for language travels on one’s tongue, the surest marker of place with all its peculiarities of habits and customs and flavors of life.”

Writing in “The Poet’s Weather,” she observes: “But I cannot help the misgivings that have always been part of my poetic weather, so to speak. British courtesy and American lugubriousness do not go well with life in my own countryside. The pace, the accents, the tones, the attitudes, the humor are not identical to what I know of the people who are part of my milieu. A certain flavor of home dissipates in the borrowed tongue.” In a keynote address given at the Iligan National Writer’s Workshop, Alunan (2008) explicates once more the indelible connection of place and language: “For the ancient stories are always clear about what makes a nation great, and these are self-awareness, and love and pride for what one knows oneself to be. Awareness covers every tree, the sacred mountain, the life-giving rivers in the land; the lifeways, harvest, workshop, birth, marriages, death; the values, the moral and ethical codes binding our society, sin, retribution, reconciliation.”

This interrelationship of place and language perhaps became clearer and more evident for Alunan, when she worked as translator and verse stylist of the *Ulahingan* from 1987 to 1993. Her translations appear in volumes 2, *Begyasan’s Visit to Insibey*, and 3, *The Dream of Begyasan*, and all of volume 4, *Kepu’unpu’un*. About her work on this Philippine epic, she remarks: “The people who possess an epic tradition like the

Ulahingan are directly immersed in an intimate verbal universe, tenaciously lodged in the communal imagination. This serves as a powerful bonding agent among the people. The story is always concrete, physical, palpable, possessed of texture and shape, and comprehensively shared.” The gift of orality, to Alunan, could only arise from a sense of community that epic chanters such as that of the Ulahingan possess. With language and place inextricably linked, what implications do this have for her cultural work in the Philippine South? The answer is found in the anthology, *Fern Garden*, where she gathered the works of women writers from all over the Visayas and Mindanao. In her editor’s notes, she argues:

The south is a sociopolitical idea. It implies a dominant north where resources, talent, expertise are concentrated, where power and authority emanate, where quality of performance is assessed and affirmed. For the southern writer, the concept of the north includes a colonizing national language which reduces the regional languages to secondary status. Away from the center, southern lifeways thrive on their own. These lifeways yield their own stories and breed their own unique modes of thinking and seeing. Crude though this may seem, this north-south configuration nevertheless form a dimension of the composite national reality. The rhythms of southern speech are as diverse as the languages spoken in the major Visayan islands and among the many tribes of Mindanao. The diversity of language also implies a diversity of attitudes and habits of thinking and feeling.

This statement could very well be Merlie M. Alunan’s guiding principle in everything she has done in the south of the country. From her scholarly work in the literature of the Visayan languages, to her own creative opus, Alunan has carefully shaped her thoughts around and within the archipelagic context of the Visayas. An interview with Alunan reveals how “Cebuano writers live and write within the context of their language and their way of life.” Although she speaks here specifically of Cebuano writing, what she says next also applies to other literary cultures in the country: “It is within their means to affirm their work among their own peers. It is in this sense that I began talking of a ‘southern consciousness,’ awareness of our own uniqueness, pride in cultural legacies. This is important as long as the national and reductive ‘regional’ consciousness is still a powerful notion that divides the nation in a centermargin configuration.” In her introduction to *Selected Poems*, she explains:

“Like any other community, the writers’ community in the Philippines experience variance, disharmonies, dissociations. This reflects the heterogeneity that characterizes the nation. This is how the national literature is being written—with the participation of writers coming from different parts of the country, representing the pulling interests of the Filipino people north to south, east to west, center down to the margins wherever these may be located and defined, each piece representing the complex and often contradictory interests, beliefs, and aspirations of individuals and social groups.” Thus, for Alunan, there is a need to redraw the remote concept of “the Filipino nation” and to redefine “national literature.”

This is the emphasis of her critical work in Visayan literature, particularly, Cebuano and Waray literatures. Of Cebuano poetry, she reiterates the writer’s need for a community if he or she is to succeed at being a writer. This community, stresses Alunan, is founded on language: “Language is the old conch and every generation learns to sound it any way it can. The oral performance bonds the audiences and performer in ritual manner and necessity and by virtue of this, is part of the operation of the social system. Writing, while essentially a solitary act, nevertheless requires its own intimate community. This is the community of other writers who guard the traditions and serve as gauge for the quality of one’s performance. Solitude is good for the writer but it is not everything. Eventually she will need this intimate public of mentors and peers to inspire her, from whom she could learn, and who will validate her works.”

In an earlier paper on Waray literature, she enumerates the conditions needed by writing in a marginalized language to get to a place of flourishing: “Prestige and respect such as those enjoyed by writing in other major languages such as those in Filipino, Tagalog or English. This practically means rescuing Waray writing from the stigma of the label ‘vernacular,’ and granting it equal literary legitimacy in our total view of Philippine Literature, a revolution in attitude which may still be alien to the present general perspective.” On modern Waray poetry, Alunan notes: “From these new poets of Waray, speaking in the new language of modern poetry, we discover how the Filipino thrives in latitudes of intimacy. Country and nation is not an abstraction, a notion afloat in the mind. Nation is concrete—it is the road home, it is home itself where the beloved waits. It is food and drink, work and play, shelter, friend, and the supreme element that defines the core of Filipino identity—his unquestioning love and loyalty to family. It is the beloved, the land where the child played and the young man found his love, where the old man hopes to rest his bones. It is not a notion of windy praises and vague promises, but the house where one was born, and inevitably the earth which must receive him when the time is due. Thus, no matter how stodgy

life has become in the villages, no matter how stingy the seas, how the earth turns arid to the plow, the land will continue to claim us.” For the nation is home, and writing is about “claiming home,” as Alunan would later say.

CLAIMING HOME: WORKS AND WORKSHOPS

The project of “claiming home” produced five landmark works in Visayan literature: *Mga Siday ha DYVL* (NCCA, VisWrite, DYVL Aksyon Radyo, 2005), *Susumaton: Oral Narratives of Leyte* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016), *Sa Atong Dila: Introduction to Visayan Literature* (University of the Philippines Press, 2013), *Tinalunay: Hinuggung nga mga panurat nga Winaray* (University of the Philippines Press, 2017), and *Pinili: 15 Years of Lamiraw* (Katig Publications, 2019).

Mga Siday han DYVL is an anthology of poems aired in local station, DYVL’s *puplonganon* contest. *Puplonganon* is Waray for “proverb.” What started as a program where short proverbs were read on air after a morning’s fare of current events grew into a segment where whole poems were read. The radio station’s listening public was enthusiastic about the new program so that longer and longer poems were being sent in. This became the DYVL *siday* contest, *siday*, being the word for “poem” in Waray, where the voice of station manager, Francisca “Ate Bebs” Custodio, accompanies one’s breakfast after a rundown of the day’s headlines. “Radio verse,” Alunan explains in “Locating Voice in Waray Poetry,” “predisposes the poet to a persistent misreading of the life of his time. It promotes thus a certain blindness and reiterates an outmoded system of valuation that obstructs a more accurate understanding of the human circumstances. On top of this, it entrenches an unreflective mode of poetry that does no justice to the realities produced within the aegis of radio, hardly explores the range of expressive possibilities of Waray as a poetic medium.”

Although acknowledging these failures of radio poetry, Merlie Alunan provides a broader view on the poetic form: “The advent of the DYVL *puplonganon* in the early 80s hold up the fort, so to speak, for Waray poetry. For more than twenty years, this program prevented the Waray literary wall from crumbling down entirely. The once-a-day shot of poetry over radio sustained the creative spirit and gave the writers a venue for publication. Whatever shortcomings the *puplonganon siday* might now have—and I am sure there are many to point them out—one must think of it as the last defense of poetry against the forgetfulness and neglect of its community. In fact we could blame forgetfulness and neglect for all the shortcomings this body of poetry might have.” She adds: “The *puplonganon* poets work their craft from the lees of a diminishing tradition, from the extant folk materials they might encounter in the countryside, and almost surely, from instinct.” “Diminishing tradition”

here refers to the writings of the grand old men of Waray letters, the poets and playwrights of the *Sanghiran san Binisaya*: Iluminado Lucente, Eduardo Makabenta Sr., Casiano Trinchera, Norberto Romualdez Sr., Agustin El O'Mora, Vicente de Veyra, and Francisco Alvarado, to mention the most famous of the lot. Between the works of these writers and the DYVL radio poets, a discontinuity of poetic technique can be readily observed. The use of humor and irony present in the early poets is absent in the DYVL *siday*. Serious and critical of the issues of the times, which is a characteristic of the political commentary of Trinchera and Lucente, DYVL poets maintain a didactic voice throughout their works, as if they are spoken from a platform and from some predetermined authority. Nevertheless, Alunan sees the need to put the book together for its sociological documentation. The participants of the contest are ordinary folk, and their works are records of Waray society from the 1970s to the present.

Susumaton: Oral Narratives of Leyte is the outcome of a decade of research work under a grant from the UP Visayas Office of Research Coordination (UPV-ORC). "I embarked on the project on the strength of two assumptions: first, my encounter with the Visayan languages taught me that there are more similarities than differences of syntax and lexis among these languages. Second, there is also a certain homogeneity of world view and attitude among the Bisaya, perhaps the result of being within hailing distance of the sea and of one another, no matter where they are in the plains and hillsides of the islands," she writes. "I realized the urgent need to expand the body of works in the mother tongue, to establish the traditions of literary performances in the language, to preserve those traditions as a resource for the writer, and to provide reading materials for the users of the language." The collection consists of stories from the towns of Palo, Tanauan, Dulag, Tolosa, Barugo, and La Paz in northeastern Leyte. Stories range from the mysterious and magical to recollections of past events to legends and fables to personal experiences and scatological tales. This collection is a pioneering work in Waray folklore and has the largest number of stories gathered in one volume.

Alunan as literature teacher can be gleaned from the sensitivity to teaching and learning needs and the care in which she selected the works in what would later become the volume *Sa Atong Dila*, an anthology for the teaching of Visayan literature. Her literary pedagogy can be summed up in the phrase "educating the imagination."

Addressing an audience of teachers in a Philippine PEN Literature Teaching conference at the Holy Name University in Tagbilaran, Bohol, she affirms: "If we educate our children to be able to use their hands and minds for the rigors of making a living, we also owe it to them to educate them on the challenge, the joy and the

glory of being a human being, the domains of feeling and the aesthetic sense, the domains of the heart, as we may call it. The tool for such an education is literature.”

A good teacher of literature, for Alunan, is also a good critic, as “he is expected to render interpretations within the ethical framework of the society which he stands for.” Yet to become one, she recommends that the teacher-critic “master(s) not only the moral and ethical traditions both of his cultural milieu and of the entire humanities, but also the traditions of excellence of the art form he hopes to mediate upon.” She expounds in “Values and Valuing in the Teaching of the Humanities”: “Alive to the dialectics of art and life, rooted in tradition but not suffocated by it, he is thus able to act as a rare kind of shaman in the classroom, receiving with sympathy and grace every acolyte who enters [the humanities] for instructions on how to live fully as a human being, feet firm on the ground, hands ready, heart sensitive to the nuances of kinship, eyes turned to the far horizons or upward to the beckoning stars.” *Sa Atong Dila* is testament to her many years of fruitful interaction with students and teachers who share the hunger for an instructional text for the teaching of local literature. The textbook is divided into three parts: Eastern Visayas literature comprising the oral and written traditions of the Waray language, Central Visayas made up mostly of literature from Cebu and other Cebuano-speaking areas, and Western Visayas composed of the three languages of that part of the Philippine central islands: Akeanon, Kinaray-a, and Hiligaynon. Alunan can read in all these languages, having lived at certain points in her life in many parts of the Visayas.

Tinalunay is the most comprehensive anthology of Waray literature to date. The collection gathers folk literature, poetry, drama, fiction, and criticism. Literary texts are arranged historically, with every period prefaced by a critical introduction. The volume updates previous anthologies of Waray literature and makes a significant statement on the present and future of literary production in the major language of Eastern Visayas. Alongside *Susumaton* and *Sa Atong Dila*, *Tinalunay* won the National Book Awards from the Manila Critic’s Circle.

Pinili is the latest book edited by Alunan, together with Aivee Badulid and Phil Harold L. Mercurio. The anthology crowns fifteen years of the Lamiraw Creative Writing Workshop which she founded with UP Tacloban alumnus, Phil Harold L. Mercurio. Multilingual in its composition and national in its scope, the book includes works of previous fellows in Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Kinaray-a, Waray, Inabaknon, Iluko, Filipino, and English. Works in all languages are untranslated except for Inabaknon and Iluko, a testimony to Alunan’s abiding faith in the nation’s “polyphony of languages” and her call to “learn as many of these languages as we can.”

Apart from these voluminous works, her influence can be felt in the many workshops in which she has served as part of the teaching panel: the Iligan National Writers Workshop of the Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology, the Cornelio Faigao Creative Writing Workshop of the University of San Carlos' Cebuano Studies Center, and the Lamiraw Regional Creative Writing Workshop of the Northwest Samar State University, to name the most important. As an institution-builder, Alunan is known for having established the Visayas Writers Workshop (VisWrite), later, the UPV Creative Writing Program, in her home university, the University of the Philippines in the Visayas-Tacloban College. In fact, Lamiraw in Calbayog City branched out of VisWrite, which also produced the Panagsugat: All-Visayas Creative Writing Workshop, a convergence of young writers from all over the Visayas, and the All-Visayas Centennial Creative Writing Workshop of 2008, a gathering of seeded writers from the Visayas. The latter was the last workshop she directed before her retirement on December of that same year. After synthesizing the concerns of Visayan writers raised in the workshop, she reflects: "While [language, place, culture and community, craft, and politics and ideology] may not be said to define or expound the Visayan aesthetics, they may yet serve as pivotal points in limning the terms of this aesthetics." This workshop's theme was "Claiming Home," a subtle way of defiantly digging one's heels in the native soil: "The Visayan will always resist coercion, no matter what it takes.... We will go on writing as not to be silenced in one's own native ground. We will go on writing until the deaf will hear. Write until the indifferent will finally perk up and pay attention."

Her workshops produced a harvest of new writing in what was then a barren landscape. Waray literature's recent efflorescence saw the publication of Victor N. Sugbo's *Inintokan* by the University of the Philippines Press and Voltaire Q. Oyzon's *An Maupay ha mga Waray ug iba pa nga mga siday* by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). In 2010, Janis Claire Salvacion's *Siso Sakradang ug iba pa nga mga siday han tagoangkan*, Harold L. Mercurio's *Ayaw Pagpudla an Tuog ug iba pa nga mga siday*, and Neil D. Lopido's *Ha Salog ug iba pa nga mga siday* came out under a grant from the NCCA and Ateneo Institute of Literary Arts and Practice's (AILAP) Ubod New Authors Series. More and more works are expected to come out in the next few years, as a community of writers and readers has become more and more visible.

AN AFFIRMATION

In her introduction to Oyzon's *An Maupay ha Mga Waray*, Alunan asserts: "For the disappearance of the poet in the culture and the language bodes no good for the

community. For the poet is the one who remembers best and who insists on the importance of memory.” Thus, to write is to remember, and to keep the stories and poems in a community intact is to keep the communal memory whole. For Alunan, the idea of a “south” is still as nation as the idea of “Manila.” It is in the south of the country, after all, that one can only experience what it means to live in an archipelago, to live in a nation of many tongues and cultures, to live in a nation of ethnolinguistic communities. The diversity need not trouble us, as Alunan’s work in the Visayas seems to suggest. Rather, it should enrich us with the ability to convey a thought or inclination in more ways than one. In this way, the nation becomes, not a remote entity, but a reality, as real as yams and taro in one’s side of the hill, as real as typhoons, earthquakes, and wars that have changed so much of our lives here in the South, as real as the sun on the skin of the land breathing with the life of the ancestors.