

Critical Understanding: English Studies, General Education, Liberal Arts

Gémino H. Abad

English as a major discipline or degree program is descended from the Liberal Arts, and the Liberal Arts from the West, from Greek and Latin literatures and other classical disciplines. And what we call General Education today is of course descended from the Liberal Arts: in particular, philology and poetics, grammar and rhetoric, logic and dialectic.

I.

A brief historical overview gives us the proper perspective.

“English” or “English Studies” came about through the colonial American public school system in our history. As early as 1899–1900 the primary schools—where instruction was secular, and schooling free and compulsory—“enrolled more than 100,000 Filipino children.”¹ English was established as the common medium of communication and instruction, and in 1901, 600 teachers from America arrived aboard the transport *Thomas* to serve as principals, superintendents, and teachers in the highly centralized public school system that had been organized

¹ Teodoro A. Agoncillo and Milagros C. Guerrero. 1986. *History of the Filipino People*, 7th edn., 305–07.

on January 21 that year. In 1908, the University of the Philippines (UP) was established; in 1915, Ignacio Villamor became the first Filipino president of UP. Its governing Board of Regents was chaired by the Secretary of Public Instruction, a post that no Filipino was allowed to occupy until the Philippine Commonwealth was established in 1935 under American tutelage.

In contrast with the colonial Spanish system of education, which favored children of the privileged classes, stressed religious instruction, and kept the Spanish language for the elite, the American public school system was open to the masses, being free at the primary level, stressed citizenship and the democratic way of life, and disseminated English throughout the Philippine archipelago. However, "Filipino materials of instruction were almost non-existent in the curriculum; young Filipinos were taught American songs, American ideals, [and] the lives of American heroes and great men in complete indifference to Filipino patriots, ideals and culture; the use of the vernacular was prohibited and punishment was actually meted out to those who dared speak the native dialects [in the school premises]."² Thus, the benefits from the American public school system did not come without cost to our historical memory and pride in our own cultural heritage. And yet, if we read close and well our literatures in Spanish, English, and our own indigenous languages, it would become evident that our scholars, artists, and writers have always stood proud like the molave upon our own ground.

Because English was the medium of instruction in our public school system since 1900, English effectively became our country's first national language or lingua franca: after 1913, English became not only the chief instrument for the acquisition of new learning, not only the favored medium by which to represent the Filipino to themselves and to the world, but also the principal means to employment, social

² Agoncillo and Guerrero, 307.

status, prestige and power. Today, English and Filipino are our country's "official languages," as our Constitution provides—both our national lingua franca in all regions of our archipelago, and both, like any given historical language, evolving and assimilative of other languages, regional or foreign. English today is also, needless to say, our international lingua franca: a common language with various peoples on our planet home.

Our country's literature in English, like its scholarship, was bred in the university, and UP may justly claim to be the cradle of Philippine letters in English through its literary organs, *The College Folio* (1910–1913) and *The Literary Apprentice* (since 1928) of the UP Writers' Club, as well as through its national writers workshop every summer since 1964. In only half a century since the first published literary endeavors in English in 1905 in *The Filipino Students' Magazine* in Berkeley, California, the country already possessed a significant body of fiction, poetry, drama, and the essay in English. Indeed, as early as 1927, the Bureau of Education put out *Philippine Prose and Poetry*—"the first attempt," says Luther B. Bewley, then the Bureau's director, "to make use of exclusively local contributions in literature as subject matter for classroom instruction in secondary schools."³ This four-volume anthology was the prescribed textbook in four years of high school until the 1960s. By the mid-fifties, *Philippine Literature in English* was already being offered as a formal collegiate course at the UP.

A Philippine national language came rather late through legislation. The Philippine constitution of 1935 enjoined the National Assembly to "take steps toward the development and adoption of a common language based on one of the existing native languages" (Art. 2). On 13 November 1936, the Institute of National Language was established to study the various Philippine languages and adopt a language-base for a national tongue; a year later, on December 20, President Manuel L.

³ Luther B. Bewley. 1935. "Foreword" to *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, rev. edn., vol. 1: 1.

Quezon “proclaimed the language based on Tagalog as the country’s national language.”

Well worth noting is what Manuel L. Quezon, known as the father of Tagalog-based “Pilipino” (now also called “Filipino”) as the national language, said to the Philippine Writers’ League in 1940: “We must have a national language. It is not because we cannot give expression to our emotions in a foreign language. That is nonsense. . . . Time and again I have heard Tagalog writers say, ‘Oh, we can only express the Filipino soul through one of our dialects!’ Nonsense, I repeat. . . . Language has no nationality. It is nationality that gives the name to the language when it adopts it.”⁴ One might well add that a national language isn’t created by law, it is created by writers, because writing gives it a particular form and a tradition. S. P. Lopez, assessing in 1940 “The Future of Filipino Literature in English,” writes: “There is nothing in the Filipino soul that cannot be transmitted through the medium of English and which, when transmitted, will not retain its peculiar Filipino color and aroma. . . . If the first test of literature is the test of continued growth and development, then it may safely be said that no literature written in any other language in this country can pass this test as successfully as English.”⁵

But in 1957, Fr. Miguel A. Bernad, S. J., famously thought of Philippine literature as “perpetually inchoate . . . in many languages” because, first, the writers couldn’t earn a living from their writing; second, we were torn by several languages or had not mastered English well enough; and third, we were culturally confused or had not fostered enough our own hybrid culture.⁶ And in 1975, Emmanuel Torres, himself an eminent poet in English, thought that “The poet writing

⁴ Arguilla, Manuel E. et al. 1973. *Literature under the Commonwealth*, 8.

⁵ Salvador P. Lopez. 1940. *Literature and Society*, 240, 243.

⁶ Miguel A. Bernad, S. J. 1961. *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree*, 105; 1983. *Tradition and Discontinuity*, 5, 23.

in English . . . may not be completely aware that to do so is to exclude himself from certain subjects, ideas, values, and modes of thinking and feeling in many segments of the national life that are better expressed—in fact, in most cases, can only be expressed—in the vernacular.”⁷

With both Fr. Bernad and Torres, I humbly, most heartily disagree. If anything at all must needs be expressed—must, because it is somehow crucial that not a single spore of thought nor a singular filament of feeling be lost—then one must needs also struggle with one’s language, be that indigenous or adopted, so that one’s text or word-weave might shine in the essential dark of language, its lexicon, where words and words only read one another. Otherwise, the vernacular, by its own etymology, is condemned to remain the same “slave born and raised in his master’s house.”⁸

But the three problems about literature that exercised Fr. Bernad have persisted not as causes but only as problems that every writer confronts. Writers, especially poets, still cannot earn a living from writing, but they’re alive and well, and many more have perversely persevered there than in the generation of Fernando Maramág or Nick Joaquin: perversus (versum), or through verse, where Latin versus means “furrows,” implying that the writer works or cultivates the soil of any natural language. Today, our writers’ mastery of their medium can be readily assumed. It is now not simply a matter of personal choice, whether one might write in English or in one or the other Philippine language, for indeed the trend among our young writers today is toward bilingualism (including even Spanish). Some may even be said to be writing in the space between English and a Philippine language; the poet Simeon Dumdum, for instance, seems to clear a path between English and Sugbuanon (Abad, *A Habit of Shores*, 1999: 203–10), much like Alejandrino Hufana before

⁷ Emmanuel Torres. 1965/1974. *An Anthology of Poems*, 13.

⁸ Charlton T. Lewis. 1916. *A Latin Dictionary for Schools*, 1148.

him whose poems in English stalk, as it were, modes of expression in Iloko. Nevertheless, whether the poet's medium is English or some native language, it would still be the poet's task to reinvent the language. A poem isn't given by language; rather, the writer must achieve a mastery of the way of looking and thinking that inheres in the language, for such sense for language empowers the imagination for those "twistings or turnings of sense and reference of words and utterances"⁹ by which any thought or feeling, stance or attitude, is endowed with form and meaningfulness. That sense for language is the basic poetic sense because, to speak or write and make sense, one has to find one's own way through the wilderness of language.

It may be that the most serious problem is still cultural, but it cannot be because of inchoateness of literature, in whatever language—unless, of course, our education deteriorates. Yet, a major aspect of that cultural problem is the erosion of reading competence (in whatever language) among young people today, owing chiefly (in my opinion) to the many audio-visual forms and voids of entertainment that have seriously diminished their sense for language. The reading public for our literature in English and in other Philippine languages has always been small, mostly limited to those who have had a college education; such patronage has suffered too from the globalization of the book trade and the stiff competition from other forms of leisure and sources of pleasure. Most of our writers in English come from the middle class and are college graduates; as a consequence, although with notable exceptions, our fiction and poetry in English since the 1950s deal with the life of the urban upper and middle classes. Since Philippine life to the present is essentially rural, it seems incumbent upon our writers that their imagination encompass provincial life and the countryside, the very heartland of our own "scene so fair." It has often been remarked

⁹ John Hollander. 1988. *Melodious Guile: Fictive Patterns in Poetic Language*, 1.

too that, curiously, despite the Filipino's lightsome and festive attitude toward life (generally speaking), there is little humor and other forms of the comic spirit in our fiction and poetry in English—but again, with notable exceptions. Whatever be the case, the fact remains that the poets must liberate themselves constantly from both their language and their subject: that is to say, they must constantly rediscover their language and constantly see anew their world, both.

II.

English as a major discipline began, says Wayne C. Booth,

... as a catch-all inheritance from the collapse of classical studies ... Those studies, because of the richness of [ancient Greek and Roman] literature were an equally ill-defined assemblage of history, archaeology, philology, grammar, logic, rhetoric, literary theory and criticism (poetics), and dialectic. When "English" took over as the "discipline" charged with the major responsibility for liberal education, it initially took over some remnants of [that ill-defined assemblage] except archaeology. But most of the disciplines were quickly dropped or watered down, leaving philology and history for the specialists, and grammar and fragments of rhetoric for teachers of non-[English] majors.¹⁰

Thus English or "English Studies" began then as a discipline "charged with the major responsibility for liberal education," and thus, if what we call "General Education" is at heart "liberal education," we need to ask: What is our central concern in that assemblage of eight advance integrative courses in the proposed UP System General Education

¹⁰ Wayne C. Booth. 1985. *The Vocation of a Teacher: Rhetorical Occasions 1967–1988*, 8.

program? Those courses are: Ethics; Self and Society; Mathematics, Culture and Society; Science, Technology and Society; Living Art and Culture: Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding; Living Systems; Understanding the Physical Universe; and Life and Works of Rizal.

The short answer, in Booth's own phrase, is "critical understanding" because, through all those eight courses, the basic subject matter is the practice of the liberating arts—that is, "the arts of reading, thinking, writing, and speaking."¹¹ No matter what our theories about language and literature, or what our ideological advocacies, what we do at the very heart of General Education—indeed, at the very heart of the teaching profession is the practice of the liberating arts in/by the language that we have learned to master. That is our first challenge: the mastery of the linguistic medium. From that wellspring of mastery we teach the liberating arts of reading, thinking, writing, and speaking. The language just happens to be English because English (like Spanish, which we have lost) is both a global language and a global literature, and because its dominance is a historical fact in our own history—the same historical force that the world today has come to grips with. If it were Tagalog or Filipino, or Cebuano, or any other Philippine language that we are teaching from the same wellspring of linguistic mastery, it would be the same liberating arts that we would practice and teach.

That practice of the liberating arts of reading, thinking, writing, and speaking—the same practice we try in our teaching to instill in our students—is precisely what liberates us

into whatever [is] for us [individually] the next order of human awareness or understanding, the next step forward in our ability to join other minds, through language, ... to join them in ... a "consciousness raising," ... [or] "critical understanding," a phrase that necessarily risks the oxymoronic

¹¹ Booth, 20, 9.

in order to include both the thought and the passion. . . . [That] critical understanding will replace, on the one hand, sentimental and uncritical identifications that leave minds undisturbed and, on the other, hypercritical negations that freeze or alienate.¹²

Freeing ourselves through critical understanding is the central experience in the practice of the liberating arts, in all those courses in “general” or “liberal” education. And that practice is

our center that deserves [our] loving service and that can provide, when we appeal to it, a test of all that we do. . . . Can anyone claim that we have no rationale for what we do, when the hunger for critical understanding is so seldom aroused and satisfied in our world?”¹³

Our culture, or any culture today, for that matter, is a “reading/writing/thinking/speaking culture”; indeed, one might regard culture as an ongoing conversation. It is interesting to note what Booth says about the state of education in the United States in the 1980s:

Nobody denies that most students entering most colleges write badly, read little, speak in puzzling fragments, and hence in effect think badly or not at all. They then enter “programs,” most of which require little writing, scant reading (and then only of an undemanding kind, the predigested pablum of most textbooks), no disciplined speech, and “thinking” only of whatever kind is useful in practicing a given specialty.¹⁴

¹² Booth, 20–21.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Booth, 9–10.

III.

Allow me to end on a personal note about certain convictions.

To the very present, I've been teaching English as my profession since graduating from UP in 1963. I had teachers who inspired me to join the faculty by their passion for critical reading of the great works of literature, their commitment to critical thinking and luminous writing. I learned: where there is no question, there is no quest; I learned: where no words break, there one "thinks truth in his heart" (Psalms, 15: 3). I became a skeptic—from Greek, *skeptesthai*, meaning, "to look, to consider." That was what my college education equipped me for: a care for thought that, this side of Eden, is our only light. Look and consider; to read close is to open. What we regard as the universal plane is not the realm of eternal verities, it is our own small clearing of everlasting quest and questioning.

It is a curious thing that the word "dogma" is from Greek *dokein*, meaning "to seem, or to seem good," which is by definition what an opinion is. The word "opinion" itself is from Latin *opinari*, meaning "to suppose, imagine, or conjecture"; so, an opinion is anything that hovers between fact and fiction, with more or less of either one. That is how I read our newspaper columnists. Likewise, the word "theory" is from Greek *theoria*, "a viewing"; hence, "a viewpoint." Any theory is only a way of making sense; no theory has a monopoly of answers. That is how I read our literary critics and theorists.

I think then that the most crucial factor in everyone's education is the love of reading. It begins early, and is nourished over time by a deepening sense for language. Without reading with that fine sense for language, all education ceases, all pursuit of truth, knowledge, wisdom is at default. All our efforts in teaching English are directed at enhancing and enriching the student's sense for language—the supreme human invention (be that English or other natural language), for without language, we have no memory, no history, no culture. Every

language grows organically through its usage by the finest minds, even as humanity's consciousness through global intercourse also draws each one into a singular whole. It may be that language is our planet's Internet: shall it weave all tongues into humanity's singular text—a kind of universal “critical understanding”? That metaphor of the tongue for language suggests that, when skillfully employed, language enables us to savor the reality, the truth that it elucidates or evokes.

In our etymological trips, we see not only that English is hybrid from various invasions: Germanic, from Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Greek from the Roman incursion, French from the Norman conquest. Like Tagalog-based Filipino or Taglish as hybrid national lingua franca: Malay from pre-Spanish times, Spanish and English, and admixtures from other Philippine languages. We see not only that any natural language is omnivorous, assimilating words and nuances of words from various cultures; but also, most importantly, that the sense for language is the basic poetic sense, that is to say, our most intimate sense of our reality. “Poetic,” as most everyone knows, is from Greek *poiein*, “to make”: thus, language makes real, to write is to get real, we think with words and words to make sense. But the only reality we shall ever know, in science and in the humanities, is only, and nothing more than, our human reality, because what we grasp as “facts” (again, Latin, *facere*, “to make,” *factus*, “done”) are only what sense we make of anything we perceive. And only with words and words of a given historical language do we give form to our perceptions whereby we grasp a sense of our reality, what we call “our world.” In that light, we could regard language itself as already work of translation: the flesh made word, as it were. So, writing is also translation—again, from Latin, *transferre*, *translatum*, “to convey or ferry across.” For to write is to ferry across the river of words and the images they evoke the reality or truth that we apprehend without hurt or injury to the mind's import and aim. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, says Derrida: There is nothing outside the text. And Shakespeare's Puck would perhaps counter: Everything's out there and mocks the text.

This is why I put a premium on language, and in the same instance, also on imagination, which is the finest intelligence. This is not a mere Romantic fancy. Without imagination, we have no literature, no art, no science, no technology. If the sense for language is the basic poetic sense because it is with words and words that we construct our sense of our world, then it is the poetic moment, the moment of writing, that “open[s] to the intuition that all language refuses,” as the poet Yves Bonnefoy says.¹⁵ That intuition—the bread and wine of all great writers—is a power of the imagination that enables language to transcend itself, to override its limitations by its own evocative resources: that is, those figures and images of thought and feeling, those “twisting or turnings of sense and reference,” by which the thinker-writer clears his own path through language. He makes his own clearing within language, for he has his own distinctive style, a manner of expression by which its matter or subject is negotiated. I often call to mind Albert Camus’s concept of style: “the simultaneous existence of reality and of the mind that gives reality its form.”¹⁶

All that language refuses is opened up by the writing, for “the knowing,” says Jose Y. Dalisay Jr. “is in the writing.” But what is language’s refusal? That is symptomatic of its inadequacy to reality, for language fixes our perceptions with labels and names, and we are entrapped in abstractions. Yet, language secretly yearns to be free. All writing is “text” (from Latin *texere*, “to weave”), and it is the imagination that weaves the text by which the words are set free to evoke, to call forth to mind, the truth or reality that we seek. The words of any language are single and bereft in the dead sea of the language’s lexicon where the words only read themselves. No meaningfulness arises from there because the meanings of words do not arise so much from themselves, nor from

¹⁵ Yves Bonnefoy. 1991. “In the Shadow’s Light,” tr. John Naughton, 163.

¹⁶ Albert Camus. 1951. “The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,” tr. Anthony Bower, 271.

their differential relations, as from lives lived as imagined. “When the imagination sleeps,” says Camus, “words are emptied of their meaning”: for the words come to life only when writer or reader light them up with their imagination, for only then are the words brought into interplay in some order by which a thought or feeling, a human experience, is endowed with definite form. From there, that form made up wholly of elected words, a meaningfulness arises, from reader to reader, each one drawing imaginatively from his experience of the world in his own community of a shared ideology or world-view. Sometimes we use the expression, “in other words,” as to say, we are again on the verge of language, we are pushing our thinking/writing/speaking to the edge of expression, attempting to find another way of weaving our text to endow with a clearer, more definite form an elusive thought or feeling.

In other words—that is our sign and signature: the quest and questioning is unending.

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C. M. Recto Hall, Bulwagang Rizal,
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