

Philippine Literature as an Instrument for Restoration

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Abstract

This article is based on the author's paper read at the International Interfaith Conference on Religion and Art, Chiang Mai, Thailand, August 16-21, 1987.

This paper takes literature in the usual understanding of the term and does not therefore include here certain Philippine fiction writers and their recent works that record actual historical events like the momentous February 1986 revolution. Likewise, because of the specific attention on the writers' involvement of sociological relevance, certain other exclusions are found necessary.

Keyterms: religion, art, beauty, restoration, integrity, freedom

This paper concentrates on the Philippine experience and does not presume to speak for Christian Asian nations generally—although it is rather supposed that much of what is mentioned here will not be strange to these other countries. Like a number of nations today the Philippines recently went through a historic crisis resulting in political and economic upheaval. Having in mind the results of that disruption this paper focuses on the involvement of contemporary Philippine

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literature and the creative writers in religion and art as constituting an instrument for general restoration in the Philippines.

Quite often in considering the realities of art and religion we think of art and beauty as being put to use in the service of religion; that is, art becomes an object for the religious manifestation. The Philippine writer, it seems, from the evidence of his works, tends to regard the preceptor of art and religion as coming from the same source, from the deep wellsprings of the human spirit. Predictably for him, therefore, both religion and art partake of the mystical, which is experienced in flashes of personal revelation; and because for the writer these are encountered in a very personal and private way they become the force that gives his writing its substantial belief and authenticity.

At the same time an essential distinction has to be recognized. The experiences, or call them revelations or flashes of insight mystical in nature, are not in themselves the subject of the writer's art but are rather objectified and completed as they take on meaningfulness in his concern for his fellowmen and his world. It appears therefore that for the Philippine creative writer, without such a movement from the inward encounter to the outward objectification in the concerns of society these personal revelations would have little meaning or permanence—not after all a unique phenomenon but inherent in writers who must be relevant.

Very little definition of religion or art as such—or even of Christian religion or Christian art—is attempted here except as nutshelled in the last statements above and as specifically fleshed out later in this paper by direct reference to certain contemporary Philippine poets and fiction writers and their works. It may be mentioned in passing that the materials and issues treated in many lyrical works in the past, particularly in the nineteenth century and earlier, reveal a more universal than local application. In the contemporary works it is not surprising that we find religion and art and the moral order existing as one in the local scene.

Coming back to the recent crisis in the Philippines: It is true that the twenty years of inhuman rule by a tyrant and his wife which culminated in the bloodless revolution that brought about their downfall in February 1986, have left the country economically devastated. Yet one could say that in the wake of this disaster what has followed is a truly ambivalent situation where the workings of faith and the higher sensibilities have not been destroyed, not being so open to pillaging as the commercial and rich natural resources. Faith and sensibility continue more than ever now in the people's struggle to fit a life of survival into a

life of order and decency. It is also true that there are pockets of trouble and ferment in the country which are long-standing problems aggravated by the Marcos regime, and other problems resulting from the aftermath such as the monitored rebels that roam the countryside and prey on the people in the more isolated hamlets, and the usual insurrections from the minorities and the economically-deprived in the urban and rural areas.

But deep-rooted in the whole situation is the craving for stability and a decent life and to this end the various sectors of the Philippine society are directed toward restoration. In all this effort the leadership toward the informing rightness and order has always been taken by the Church, even in the most dangerous days of the martial regime. Today as the leadership of the Catholic church is deliberately toned down in the matter of general civil reconstruction, the role of the press, the literature, of the arts (especially as adapted to media purposes), is felt significantly. Writers and artists take their materials from the problems and issues of faith and life in the country, so that their influence is considerable, especially now that the press and the country in general are again enjoying a genuine freedom under President Corazon Aquino.

This paper has chosen four problems and issues on faith and life that are most commonly addressed in the works of contemporary Philippine fiction writers and poets.

These are the four problems:

1. Preserving the integrity of the individual's rights, beliefs, and personal experience.
2. Confirming the reality of ultimate values, while dealing with exigent social needs and problems.
3. Defining a view of significant purpose in the midst of complexity and confusion.
4. Creating a reasonable worldview beyond narrow nationalistic consciousness.

By the nature of these problems we can see that they are really interrelated.

Preserving the Individual's Integrity

Foremost among the concerns of Philippine writers today is the theme of the individual's integrity, his human rights, the sanctity of his beliefs and his personal experience. This theme of the individual's freedom and his rights surfaces in the works of the poets and fiction writers in several ways. For instance, a large part of current Philippine poetry deals with the traumatic experience from the last regime, the abuses and violations that resulted from the despotic withholding of the people's four basic freedoms, and the systematic robbing not just of the people's money, but most particularly of their dignity and humanity. This poetry represents pent-up outrage finding expression for the first time, and thus serves both as catharsis and as implicit reminder for vigilance that such an abomination as a despot must not be allowed to happen again.

Ateneo de Manila University Press recently published a collection of this kind of protest poetry in cooperation with the Goethe Institute in Manila. The title of the collection is *Versus*, which is a play on two words, *verses*, and the Latin word, *versus*, resisting, or going against. Similar poems have found their way into small magazines that publish purely poetry; one of these *Caracoa*, is being regularly funded by an American businessman in Manila who is himself a poet.

Some novelists handled this theme of individual freedom by showing the absolute power that the despot held over the lives of the people, how he could grant favors and protection and withdraw them at will, how he punished with death those who displeased him or crossed his wishes. Such a book published during the former dictator's rule is the novel of Bienvenido N. Santos, written while he was in the United States. *The Praying Man* portrays a victim of injustice in the fictional character of Cristino Magat; Magat is a successful businessman whose drug manufacturing company is raided and closed down by the President because of its adulterated products. The story tells of how Magat flees to America for his life while his brother, Crispulo, who works in the underground movement, is being hunted down in the Philippines for leading a band of 100 peasants on an abortive attack on the President's Palace. The novel exposes the vengeful procedures of the President's personal army in hunting down and punishing citizens who had angered the tyrant.

Some of the most compelling fiction on this theme are written by Ninotchka Rosca, one of them the *Monsoon Collection*, and by Linda Ty-Casper, who wrote *Wings of Stone*. Both titles were published outside the Philippines. These books are surely an act of courage on the part of these writers and demonstrably justify the creative writer's claim as an agent that should remain free from the demands and strictures of the state.

Another book written on the idea of freedom is entitled, aptly enough, *To Be Free*, by Edilberto K. Tiempo. This novel was published in 1972, the very year President Marcos imposed martial law on the Philippines. *To Be Free* was chosen by a Cultural Committee to receive the Republic Heritage Award, but antagonized by the book's challenging title the President's men in the Palace overruled the decision and gave the award to a dead poet.

Other writers address the problem of individual rights by centering on the plight of the peasants in the rural areas, as well as in the depressed urban places. Francisco Sionil Jose has written novels almost exclusively on the theme of injustice in the agrarian industry in the Philippines. His novels portray absentee landlords and the feuds between them and their impoverished tenants, who are driven to extreme measures like threatening and killing their landowners. Mr. Jose's book entitled, *My Brother, My Executioner*, is described as a portrayal of "man's search for a moral order . . . and for social justice."

Confirming Ultimate Values

A second problem treated by Philippine writers has to do with confirming the authority of ultimate principles and values. Inevitably, a great temptation in any restoring society is to go by the dubious but more compelling values dictated by exigent needs like hunger, illiteracy, general poverty, and disease. In the process of fighting these urgent problems the people could forget the more transcendent standards or set them aside, in favor of quicker but more dishonest and inhuman means. A novel, *The Hand of the Enemy*, by Kerima Polotan Tuvera, portrays the relentless drive of individuals toward professional and commercial success. In place of the values and conventional courtesies established in Philippine society, where close family ties have always required the practice of harmony and reciprocal relationships, this novel depicts only the power struggle between fellowmen in a harsh and competitive context.

But there are also books that strongly project positive attitudes toward the values of a God-fearing society, where the ultimate concerns of life, love, death, and personal faith commend the higher principles, those that unfortunately tend to take a back set in the daily affairs of society. In this type of reading many of our readers find the writers' literary views even more easily acceptable than the sermons preached in church, for the reason that the stories generate dramatically the reality of such values as self-commitment, the courage to be honest, the practice of justice and mercy for one's fellowmen. Such a positively-oriented book is the collection of short stories, *The Man Who Play God*, written by Dr. Arturo B. Rotor. Himself a medical doctor, his stories are exclusively about medical doctors who face the challenge of the highest standards in the practice of their profession. When confronted by difficult choices these sensitive professional men commit themselves to transcendence, and rise above the demands of personal needs to pursue a higher vision of service and usefulness. These professional people do play God, not in the pejorative implication of that term, but rather in the way of the God of the New Testament, who requires of men the ultimate commitments, beyond self, as demonstrated in the transcendent life of His Son. Dr. Rotor's book is a good example of Philippine fiction projecting the ultimate values as they are realized in the daily lives of individuals and in the choices they make toward personal mastery.

Defining Significant Purpose

A third concern indicated in the works of Philippine fictionists and poets is the necessary penetration of a central purpose and meaning into life. In much of the poetry and fictional works we see the attempt to expose a view of significant human purpose in the midst of complexity and the external confusion ever growing in our world. It is interesting to note that in the artistic writings of the Philippines any suggested view toward a central human purpose is almost never portrayed as a collective effort, never as a collective ideology. Rather, the role of faith and reason is projected as shaping the individual's destiny; that is, the role of faith and reason is almost always dramatized in Philippine writings as experience in the singular, as the unique perceptions of one individual character. Thus when the suggested central meaning emerges from the story or poem the picture comes out as more coherent and

understandable than the fragmented perceptions generated by a whole society of a diverse political and economic nature.

The Central Purpose Specified

In their works many Philippine writers have defined this central human purpose as the implicit responsibility of man to preserve himself and his environment, to apprehend the finest aspects of himself and his created world, and to protect and nourish these aspects—this is man's central purpose as many writers see it. To this end, therefore we can see the need for the individual to introspect his relationship to his Creator and to define for himself the meaning of his tenure on earth. Introspection into our relationship to the divine is increasingly difficult to do in the burgeoning technology in our industries and business systems and conglomerates. Thus it seems, that it remains for the writers to "go down into the depths" of man's nature as Joseph Conrad also demonstrates in his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, and in his memorable story, "The Secret Sharer" – going down into the depths in order to truly fathom man's nature: his nature without the overlay of the superficial in social conventions. The writers are saying that faith and reason point the way into the simple and coherent picture that is man's central purpose, which is to refine and preserve himself and his created world. Christian religious teaching would call it stewardship, where men are acknowledged responsible for the state of God's creation, including the state of created man himself. Thus in the last few years there have also been poems that deal with ecology, and fiction that touch tangentially on the concern for the world's gradually polluting environment. For poetry of this kind the output is recent and quite slim, the finest ones being written by Professor Eduardo Ortega, a biologist who used to teach at Silliman University.

There are likewise many deeply introspective poems that express certain views of the author pointing to a meaningful purpose for man, and also short stories that project the central character's sensitive penetration into his life's meaningfulness: such stories lead the reader to realize a simple but elevated understanding of man and his world. One example of such a story is "Fruit of the Vine," from a collection of short stories written by Rowena Tiempo-Torrevillas and another entitled, "Midsummer," by the late Manuel Arguilla. "Fruit of the Vine" is a rather long story, since it chooses to reveal the depths of the character's sensitive nature and his circumstances in such a way that the story gradually

unfolds toward the artless but profound truth which the character indicates in the end to be the ruling factor of his life; this truth may be stated as the fullness of life that is available to the sensitive man who is open to beauty and aware of its presence in all things. The story, "Midsummer" on the other hand, is a very short idyll of the countryside, almost an allegory where a stranger happens to meet a young woman at the well one hot noon. The story is by way of delineating what is seen as God's biblical purpose for man, through the simple and primal relationship between male and female as they spin out the continuing cycle of life within the created world of rural nature.

Gregorio Brillantes, one of the finest Philippine fictionist today, has written two collections of short stories that generate almost exclusively his definition of man's central purpose. "The Distance to Andromeda," the title story of the first volume is a haunting exposition of a growing boy's search toward ultimate meanings, and is now a classic in contemporary Philippine fiction. A later story, "Apollo Centennial," is apocalyptic, written in the very directed and human manner often used by serious space-age writers and is both thoughtful and satiric as an interpretive evaluation of traditional and modifying Filipino mores and conventions.

Developing a Reasonable World-View

The fourth concern of the writer's included in this paper involves an area that has become more and more a natural part of the Philippine writer's material. It has to do with creating a reasonable world-view beyond narrow nationalistic consciousness. In one sense this need for an expanded world-view is already self-generating and self-directing as in other countries because there exists quite naturally in the Philippines a responsive awareness toward the rest of the world; so that despite its present economic nullity, there is nonetheless a critical understanding of the Philippines as a reality in the sovereignty of nations, and particularly so as a member of the Asian family.

However, there is a sense—a political sense—in which a useful world-view needs to be consciously shaped, and the function appears at present to be more effectively in the hands of our journalists and political scientists rather than with the creative writers.

One interesting thing may be mentioned here. In the projection of a workable internationalism the rather paradoxical observation may be made that the world picture becomes more available as the national imperatives are more seriously introspected. It seems that the attempt

to deal with the national necessities is not being done as a matter of course with the outside world as a reference. Internationally-oriented are such matters as economic structuring, military defense bases, educational programs and conferences, human rights and the general involvement in the stabilizing of universal morality and order.

The creative writers, unlike the journalists, have their own way of addressing themselves to this problem of creating a just and workable world-view for the individual and for the nation. An example may be seen in the collection of short stories, *Upon the Willows and Other Stories*, by Rowena Tiempo-Torrevillas. In this group of five stories we can see the distinct and natural blending-in of the international consciousness in the portrayal of the characters and events. A novel, *His Native Coast*, is another contribution to the rendition of a reasonable world-view where national identity and individual identity transcend their geographical origins. Likewise, the novel already mentioned, *To Be Free*, traces the country's history through the life and fortunes of the chief character and his family and yet is consistently inclusive of the world and of certain historical events in its perspective.

The Philippine writer believes in a God of history: the term, *history*, meaning life continually lived and continually interpreted as God's hand present in the affairs of men. Hence, for the serious writer, who by necessity is historically-oriented, there is no such thing as writing in an esoteric vacuum. There is no turning away from social issues, he is constantly involved and, unsurprisingly, at times deeply implicated. In fact he sees this involvement as the responsibility of every reasonable person and the lack of knowledge or special expertise is finally no real excuse for writing irrelevant abstractions under the signature of art. It does not matter whether the issues pertain to the sciences or to religion and art, society should never be out of anyone's depth, whether he be writer or no.

W. H. Auden expresses this idea in his memorable lines from the poem, *Canzone*. These lines refer to the world of science and the world of art and the just man's response to them:

Whether we meet in a majestic world
Of solid measurements or a dream world
Of swans and gold, we are required to love
All homeless objects that require a world.

The "objects" in the last line does imply homeless ideas, too. In this connection we borrow from Howard Thurman, a Christian preacher-

writer of our time, quoting Albert Schweitzer, whose concept of personal destiny is the act of placing oneself "in utter devotion, in the hands of the living God, in a living world, among living men."

Before we close it is proper to mention one thing that is often said of the writer who is also an artist. People tend to label the artist-writer as someone who does not really belong in the "nitty-gritty" of practical society and that, essentially, such a writer is a solitary person caught in his own private toils of fancy and the imagination. Consequently, by this definition—which is obviously suspect—the Philippine writers whom I have cited here would seem to be no artists, for by the evidence of their works they are steeped in the welter of confusions, needs, and other predicaments presently prevailing in the Philippines.

In a way the writer-artist is indeed solitary, since his occupation demands it. But he never feels that he is alone. A famous contemporary philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, suggests that religion is what a man does with his seclusion. The search for meaning and the reaching for God, the revelations that spark the searching and the reaching, are indeed utterly private and lonely acts; but for the writer these intensely personal and solitary discoveries are experienced and carried out in the context of people—within his awareness of people—with whom he shares these same confusions, needs, and predicaments, and it is only the alchemy of his art that allows for the order and objectivity and compassion that transform the sociological facts into insight and artistic meaningfulness.

These then are four problems most commonly addressed by Philippine writers of fiction and poetry.

1. Preserving the integrity of the individual's rights, belief, and personal experience.
2. Confirming the reality of ultimate and higher values while dealing with exigent social needs and problems.
3. Defining a view of significant human purpose in the midst of complexity and confusion.
4. Creating a reasonable world-view beyond narrow nationalistic consciousness.