

P r e f a c e

First Words: Journey to Language

This compilation of keynote lectures of the Iligan National Writers Workshop (INWW) from 1994 to 2008 is the first of its kind in the country. What would otherwise be lectures normally available only to a select audience are gathered together in this volume to make them accessible to other groups of writers, literature teachers, researchers and students.

These keynote lectures, like the prayers for writers offered by each of the year's INWW writing fellows have been central to the INWW's opening ceremonies and, often, characterized the conduct each year of the INWW held at the Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT) in Iligan City.

To formally open the INWW with a keynote lecturer by a significant contemporary writer seemed to be an excellent idea by the writer Jaime An Lim but the task of choosing and inviting the writers that fell on me had been real learning experiences.

Only one writer invited to address the INWW, fictionist and scholar Resil B. Mojares could not make it simply because he had a previously-arranged speaking engagement in Spain. But the invitation for him to address the INWW in the future stays.

Each writer invited to speak, from Bienvenido Lumbera to Isagani R. Cruz to Antonio Reyes Enriquez, encouraged young writers in the workshops to recreate life through an imaginative use of language.

In this book, the writer's concerns on the making of literature and the teaching of it are addressed by the poets Cirilo F. Bautista in "The Teaching of Poetry: Problems and Perspectives" and Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta in her "Strategies in Teaching Literature: For or Against Interpretation."

Both poets have been lecturers in the INWW's twin component, the Literature Teachers Conference in Mindanao. Although this activity had been intermittently held due to funding problems, Bautista and Dimalanta, when delivering

their lectures at the time, were aware of the presence of literature teachers in the INWW and they sought to, respectively, address problems in the teaching of poetry against today's problems in today's prosaic environment and in teaching the approaches to literary texts from the Romantic to the Reader-oriented theories. Dimalanta cautioned that, over the need to be conversant of literary theories, the teacher must balance this with his/her establishing kinships or connections with students in the classroom in the hope of broadening their minds and making them more human.

What matters for Bautista and Dimalanta is that, for one thing, the study of literature, inherently interdisciplinary in itself, must be studied along with technical information on language. Denying the examination of language would not make literature the academic subject that it is, a subject of campaign in England's Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the late 1800's.

Chronologically arranged, the keynote lectures open with Lumbera's "Young Writing and the Subversion of the Academic" where he asserts that academic institutions play a crucial role in charting the destiny of creative writing in the country. At the same time, Lumbera, in talking about the influence of milieu on the writer, urge that creative writing teachers who spurn the use of the "Filipino" variety of English must consider this a major problem in the search for "artistic norms proper for literary works created within our cultural context."

The poet Ricardo M. de Ungria who, by a twist of fate, also wrote the introduction to the third INWW proceedings (1996), celebrates the word in his lecture, "First Words."

He reminds us that the writer is first concerned with words and only after his mastery of them can he begin to make sense. He also suggested that everyone draws on words at the major turnings of our lives such as in birth and in death. In this sense, the poet obliges because he only has words between his world and silences.

Despite his tight schedule "drowning" him in work, poet Gemino H. Abad graciously accepted our invitation to give the keynote lecture in 1997.

In his lecture, Abad distinguishes between "communication" and "creative writing" in the context of "how the poet finds a way through language not only to communicate thought and feeling but to express both"; and, in expressing the Filipino experience as well as in his response to life in whatever language he uses, the poet does so "with sensibility and imagination."

Both Abad's and Lumbera's lectures become excellent points of departure for Leoncio P. Deriada's "The Filipino Worldview and the Filipino Writer," which

certainly, too, are food for thought because of his assertion that the “typical Filipino writer and the “typical Filipino teacher” are the products of the “wrong” Philippine educational system. The few young Filipino writers whose wish is to write only in English with a foreign audience in mind should read Deriada intelligently.

Deriada’s address must have been inspired by the previous year’s keynote speaker, Merlic M. Alunan and her “Lost Ship to Erewhon: Lessons From Old Filipino Mythmakers.” “Erewhon” is the title of Samuel Butler’s allegorical novel written in 1872. Fictionist David Lodge thinks “Erewhon” is “nowhere” spelled backwards in the tradition of Thomas More’s “Utopia” (No Place).

Alunan draws parallels with our present postcolonial situation to an imaginary one in a mythic place from the Arumanen Manobo epic, Ulahingan. In light of this narration, Alunan urges young writers to go back to the stories of our race to restore us to what we have been seeking: the strength and power of our identity and with it, our pride to clear a path to our destiny.

Cebuano poet Erlinda Kintanar Alburo could not emphasize enough the vitality of the vernacular literatures, in this case, Cebuano, in her lecture, “Return to the Native” which was written in longhand while on the overnight boat trip to Iligan City from her native Cebu. Like Alunan and Deriada, Alburo encourages the writer to be knowledgeable of his native traditions for “creative authenticity.”

Fictionist Ma. Rosario S. Cruz Lucero who finished her lecture on the eve of her delivering it in her hotel room at the Elena Tower Inn in Iligan City connects with Alunan, Deriada and Alburo when she likewise wants our young writers to regard our native traditions as deep, fall back sources because they are “the psychic equipment to defend ourselves against the forcible imposition of traditions that are foreign and inimical to our lives.”

The playwright Isagani R. Cruz in “Writers Under the Rule of the Lawless” and Charlson Ong’s “Writing in a Time of Terror and the (mis) management of grief” raise the fundamental role of writers in society by reminding them to write about the truth of past and present in whatever age they live in no matter what. Cruz asserts that if they fail in this duty, it will mean the end for words, the death of language; and, for Ong, the past forgotten forever.

INWW alumni, Michael U. Obenieta and Rebecca T. Anonuevo and Vicente Garcia Groyon III write about the passion and craft of writing and what vexations and vicissitudes writers face today. In a way, all three, as well as the more senior writers in this collection remind us that when the writer writes about present realities, he recreates the past for the future.

A fitting end to this collection is fictionist Antonio Reyes Enriquez's strong reminder to writers not to be complacent nor relinquish that duty to write about our country. He knows where he is coming from, having seen much, having written much, when he says there is so much to write 'about us,' our truths, our worldviews which foreigners cannot fulfill for us. No, far from promoting indigenization, nativism or parochialism, Enriquez simply tells us to save ourselves from our mis-education and to wrestle with our own truths.

Taken together, the lectures in this volume have been written by writers whose places are assured in the history of Philippine literature; and, because based in different parts of the country, they provide balanced, if not vibrant, perspectives to the present state of our country's literatures.

There has been, on the other hand, considerable interest in the INWW being the only writers workshop to publish its proceedings each year; it is also the first national writers workshop organized in Mindanao by Mindanaoans, Jaime An Lim, Anthony L. Tan and Christine F. Godinez-Ortega with encouragement from its spiritual fathers, Cirilo F. Bautista, Leoncio P. Deriada and the late Jimmy Y. Balacuit.

The true impact of this Mindanao-based writers workshop, however, may not be felt as yet, but with the support of the National Commission for Culture and Arts (NCCA), the MSU-IIT's Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Extension (OVCRE), and the INWW's numerous patrons and benefactors, past and present, among them, the Office of the President's Presidential Management Staff (PMS); Rosalinda C. Balacuit and family; the Office of the City Mayor of Iligan City; and, the Philippine Daily Inquirer's Lifestyle Section, we are confident that the INNW could forge forward in nurturing the writer's first words in his lifetime journey towards sense and sensibility.

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Iligan City

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