

The First Iligan National Writers Workshop – Pioneering Literary Development in Mindanao

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We were a participant in the successful Iligan National Writers Workshop held the first week of May 1994. It was a historical event, to say the least, since, for the first time, writers from south of the country acquired the long-needed voice and forum for their creative consciousness. Conceived as a national workshop where the best poets, fictionist, and dramatists can interact and discuss their works, credit for its realization must be given to the officers, teachers, and staff of Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology, specifically Vice Chancellor Jimmy Y. Balacuit of the Office of Research and Extension; Dr. Jaime An Lim, Workshop Director; Christine Godinez-Ortega, Workshop Co-Director; Dr. Anthony Tan, Resident Panelist; Ralph Semino Galan, Chair of the Secretariat; and Ferdie Arcola, Chair of the Accommodations Committee. Our humble contribution was suggesting to Tony and Jaime, when they visited us in the Panorama office the other September, the need for Iligan writers to concretize such a workshop. We never thought that they would do so in such a short time.

The workshop was held also in conjunction with a Literature Teachers Conference, in the belief that the thirty or so mentors, mostly from Visayas and Mindanao, could learn from the discussions in the workshop. And they did so, on their own admittance at the end of the week, especially concerning matters of teaching methodologies, materials, and philosophy. The panelists gave them particular lectures on these areas and their involvement in the workshop enabled us to consider literature from both the creative and the educationist points of view. The output of such an encounter will undeniably be of much help to future classroom activities.

Discussions and criticisms during the workshop were enlivened by diverse

perspectives and experiences coming from the fellows. Luzon was represented by J. Neil Garcia, Camilo Villanueva, Jr., Charlson Ong, and Jim Pascual San Agustin; Visayas by Felino Garcia, Jr., Ma. Milagros Geremia, and Dino Enriquez V. Deriada; and Mindanao by Eduardo P. Ortega, Eulogia Salalima, Nancy Allen, Maribel T. Ora, Man V. Gervacio, and Saturnina S. Rodil. The level of discourse was generally high, with theoretical frameworks from New Criticism, Post-colonialism, Pragmatism, Reconstruction and Ethical Criticism being brought in to bear light on the literary works under consideration by panelists Leoncio Deriada, Steven Patrick Fernandez, Anthony Tan, Jaime An Lim, Christine Godinez-Ortega, and Cirilo F. Bautista (whose wife, Rosemarie, was conceded as an unofficial special panelist). Some of the poems were so exceptional that we have asked their author's permission to have them published in future issues of *Panorama*.

The formal opening ceremonies of the workshop took place on May 2 at Café Hermoso. The Church, the city administration, and the academe were represented. The Most Rev. Fernando Capalla, Bishop of Iligan diocese, gave the invocation; Mayor Alejo Yañez sent a proxy, Kagawad Pedro Generalao, to read his welcome speech; MSU President Emily M. Marohombsar articulated the importance of writers in national development, of literature to teachers, and culture as a component of the national soul. She cited her own initiatives in supporting the arts as head of the biggest academic community in the South. "Writers are an endangered species," she said, but they "draw out the richness of life in their works," providing teachers and readers with "a bridge to various worlds." We found her speech a blend of intellectualism and common sense, based on a correct understanding of the role of the humanities in social progress. She invited us to visit the Marawi campus – "a most beautiful place," she said – but we doubted if we could, given our tight schedule. Perhaps next year, we told her, if the workshop organizers could include a session outside Lanao del Norte.

Then the panelists and fellows were introduced to the guests, after which Dr. Bienvenido Lumbera, 1993 Magsaysay Awardee for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication Arts, delivered the keynote speech. Focusing on the theme of the writer and the institutions of learning, Lumbera averred that "literature today is largely a product of the academe," that in fact one could not think of writing in the country apart from the schools. This, of course, is true, especially in the case of our literature in English which was spawned by the American educational system. Its language and awareness took roots and blossomed in the classrooms. Now, because of education's empowering values, even our literatures in other languages have academic configurations. Yearly, upon graduation, writers from the campuses join the national literary streams.

Because of this, Lumbera suggested a re-appraisal of our historical heritage vis-à-vis the literary craft. "To what extent must the Philippine writers allow

themselves to be constricted" by western norms acquired in college? He asserted that the search for identity is no longer the concern of the writers, but creative freedom – "to break the confines that limit creativity, to interrogate the past, as it were." This is a form of subversion, he said, for the sake of liberating the literary mind so that it could soar to new heights and expand its magnitude. Though academic standards have a strong historicity, they can be reshaped to answer the imperatives of the present, thus making the writers attuned to the vibrations of contemporaneity. Lumbera advocated the use of new modes of interpreting social realities to widen literary boundaries, for it is an important tool to creative progress.

Vice Chancellor Balacuit assured us that the Iligan National Writers Workshop will continue annually as long as he is in office – "the funding of next year's workshop is already budgeted," he told us. He is very supportive of arts and culture, for a head of a technological university, because he is committed to creating humanistic men and women of science. We admire his commitment and look forward to seeing him and all our writer-friends in Iligan in April this year.