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Young Writing and the Subversion of the Academe

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Young writing in the Philippines today is largely a production of the academe. The two leading workshops that have turned out the best and the most active young writers in the country are both based in universities, the U.P. National Summer Writers Workshop and the Silliman Writers Workshop. Today, we are launching in another academic setting a third national writers workshop envisioned by the organizers as an annual event from hereon.

Indeed, one cannot think of young writing in this country apart from the academe. One looks back to the *College Folio* in the early years of the U.P. to trace the beginnings of writing in English by Filipinos. The little magazine that launched many young writers who were to become major figures in our literary history in the first half of the twentieth century was campus based, *The Literary Apprentice*. Another little magazine that gave young writers a prestigious start was *Sands and Coral*, which was founded in Silliman University. The literary section of such student publications as *The Varsitarian* (University of Santo Tomas), *Dawn* (University of the East), and *Quezonian* (MLQU) served as the training ground for many young writers who belonged to the modernist inter-university association of student writers in the 1950s and the 1960s. And in more recent times, the *Heights* of the Ateneo de Manila University has featured some of the best bilingual young writers in the literary scene.

It is in the classrooms of colleges and universities where the craft and content of young writing are set. These classes, whether in English, Filipino or any of the Philippine languages, are often run by teachers who are also writers, and this would explain to a great extent the formal refinement and thematic sophistication

of the works of today's beginning writers. Unfortunately, it is not only craft and content that student writers learn in academe. Given the fact that tertiary education in the Philippines was organized originally by American colonial interests, it is inevitable that the very direction of young writing has been laid out by writing originating from the West. In short, Philippine writing since the second decade of the twentieth century has been powered by energies inspired largely by the works of certain modern American and British authors that the educational system has made accessible to writers in search of writing models. This is not to downgrade the creativity or originality of our own writers, but simply to describe the milieu in which literary production takes place.

Modernist standards set by Western artists reacting against commercialism and the worship of technology in the industrialized economies of their society were appropriated as norms for young Filipino writers seeking to keep abreast of the times. For instance, when the U. P. Writers Club was founded in the late 1920s, it borrowed its artistic credo, "Art for Art's sake," from turn of the century. Western artists who wanted to break away from the hold of Matthew Arnold's concept of literature as a 'criticism of life.' Its credo was, in our context, an exhortation to break with the ideals of the Propaganda Movement and the Revolution of 1896, as though our writers were exercising their creative powers, not in the colonial, agricultural economy of the 'Philippine Island,' but the industrial and technological society of the Western world in the twentieth century. The situation was to reach its absurd culmination in post World War II Philippines, when New Criticism became 'the critical orthodoxy in our academe,' thus replicating the literary situation in the U.S. academe. Here, indeed, was a case of an underdeveloped country "catching up," in spite of itself, with the culture of a highly industrialized country.

In our time, six years away from the year 2000, it might be worthwhile to ponder the ways by which a Westernized academe had determined the norms by which the canon of Philippine literature has been constructed. Writers using English as their medium ought to be specially concerned about this problem, but even those working with the vernacular languages ought to face up to the question it raises: "To what extent has the Filipino writer, whether writing in English or in the vernacular, allowed himself/herself to be constrained or constricted by norms imposed by encounters in college with creative and critical works from the U.S. or England?"

There are those who will dismiss the question as irrelevant, academic," as a matter of fact. I maintain, however, that the problem is central in our search for artistic norms proper for literary works created within our own cultural context.

We have been talking about the necessity of dismantling the vestiges of colonial mentality in our culture, but little attention has been paid to the scrutinizing literary norms our educational system has been passing on to our students, particularly our student writers.

In the decade of the 1960s, Filipino writers worried over the question of identity, and the best works from that period have explored the social and cultural dimensions of human experience in the specific setting of a republic going through the convulsive processes of grappling with reform and revolution. In our time, the problem, it seems to me, is less with identity and more with creative authenticity. 'That is, having arrived at a certain degree of self-knowledge, the Filipino writer is now being challenged to break through the continuing restraints that inhibit full expression of "Filipino ness." The literary norms by which he has been taught to create need to be interrogated so that the artist can be free to innovate without fear.

The beginnings of breaking free are already in evidence. Works by three writers may be cited here to illustrate what we mean by "authenticity."

One short story that moved me very much at the U.P. National Summer Writers Workshop in Baguio recently was a piece that, by the current standards of creative writing classes and literary editors of weekly magazines, would be considered unacceptable because of its grammatical lapses and the looseness of its construction. "Things I Will Tell Her (If I Could)" is a first person narrative, a cross between a letter to her "Mom" and a private journal entry, by a teenage girl trying to understand the "facts" of her mother's life and the new experiences she has to face up to at the threshold of adulthood. The story that one is able to piece out is sordid and sad and painful, and the less than perfect English assumes the function of a shield with which an adolescent blunts the onrush of realities of urban poverty, police corruption and immorality, small town politics, parental neglect, and the isolation and loneliness of a young stranger in a new community. The author Amy Salamat is definitely not a self-conscious innovator who would "invent" English for a character from the urban poor as a fictional device. However, the grammatical lapses notwithstanding, her employment of English as medium of expression reminds those of us in the academe that all too often, we have repressed a young writer's expressive freedom and authentic voice by insisting on the same kind of correct English that one finds in the writings of American and British writers. Our demand in the use of English has been nothing less than the English of writers born to the language. The time has come, it seems to me, when professors of literature and creative writing live up to their avowed recognition of an English

uniquely Filipino. "Things I Will Tell Her (If I Could)" might very well start us on accepting a new genre in Filipino English fiction, a short narrative whose English is both a characterizing device reflective of the sensibility of the narrator and an authentic language by an author exploring the experience of contemporary Filipinos.

In an academe dominated at present by a generation of teachers of literature reared on the dicta of New Criticism, writing has generally been regarded as printed text meant to make sense as an interrelationship of words arranged on a page. The writer's "meaning" is privileged over the audience's "reading," the assumption being that the literary work on the printed page is the culmination of the artist's creative expression. Among the recent crop of young poets, we encounter audacious artists who are not content with being poets of the written word whose works seldom reach readers beyond their small circle of fellow poets and professors in the university. These new poets, exemplified in V.E. Carmelo Nadera, Jr., are mostly from the University of Santo Tomas, where the writing of poetry has taken on a new dynamism in the persons of young artists who dare cross the threshold from the printed page to the stage as poets who perform, not just read, their works. Nadera Jr., whose first book sports a title characteristic of the many contradictory moods his performances radiate (*Alit, Dalit, Galit, Halit, Ngalit, Palit, at Salit*), has made Filipino poetry in our time a "performance," harking back to earlier times when there was nothing standing between the poetry and the audience but the poet's living, breathing presence. Nadera Jr.'s ironic, often sardonic performances throw all academic caution to the winds to establish rapport with the audience through various non literary devices such as rapping, costuming, incantation and buffoonery. All this makes for the "popularization" of an art form that academics, by their grave pronouncements and consecratory practices, have elevated to "high art" such "popularization" has created poetry that is accessible, enjoyable even, as it has never been under the guardianship of academics.

Poetry as performance takes on altogether different form in Merlinda C. Bobis' *Kantada ng Babaing Mandirigma, Daragang Magayop*. What we have here is a poetic text that is also a libretto for the poet's chant and dance in which she relates in epic style the legend of the Bikol princess who has given Mayon Volcano its name and storied origins. The long poem is also a vehicle for advocacy for the feminist cause, a protest against the tradition that has molded women as creatures of adornment and adornment for the delectation of men relaxing between wars. *Kantada* has two versions, Filipino and English, both of them danced and chanted by the poet, who revives through her words and performance the ancient

art of the epic of which the Bikol Handiong is one of only two precolonial epics found among Christianized ethnic Filipinos.

In refusing to be simply the author of a printed text, Merlinda C. Bobis is insisting that the poet is not simply the creator of the words that make up her poem, she is above all the articulator of a socially significant message through both body and voice. Like Nadera Jr., Bobis courts catcalls and sniggers from a live audience with her performances. Nadera Jr.'s serio-comic performances have the ability to deflect an audience's hostility, but Bobis' total absorption in her formal offering of the ideological content of her performance makes for a delicate tight rope act every time she presents her work in public. The risk she takes with every performance charges a Bobis recital of Kantada with electric excitement that, comparatively speaking, makes a classroom reading of the work a necessary but nonetheless tedious academic chore.

What I have described in the foregoing are instances when writing went beyond "correctness" as this has been set by the classroom. Amy Salamat, V.E. Carmelo Nadera Jr., and Merlinda C. Bobis have given us works that subvert the hold of academe on young writing. These writers are products of the academe, and what they have been doing, even as these are as yet minority writing, show us that academe can subvert itself. Academe owes it to itself to subvert itself. That ought to be its task as the intellectual center of our society. In a Third World country like the Philippines, there is no alternative center that can challenge the authority of the academe on matters relating to literature. Without such challenge, academe is bound to lose the power of its ideas which give it the growth generating energy so necessary for change. In workshops like this, subversion ought to be, fearsome as it might seem, the presiding principle in the discussion of content and technique in the literary pieces by the participants. On the part of the young writers, this would require attention paid to every attempt to innovate and interrogate accustomed technique and content. And specially because they are in the position of authority in every workshop session, the panelists and other representatives of the academic establishment are enjoined to be ever mindful that a workshop is intended not merely to improve works submitted for comment but to break ground for new growth. Hospitality, not hostility, to new insights, techniques and approaches has always been the motive force that makes academe a seedbed that prepares the beginning artist for blossoming in a society that has not only discovered its identity but also recovered its authentic voice.