

INW Photo



Ricardo de Ungria, an Adopted Son of Iligan City, is one of the best poet-performers and much awarded poet in the country today. He has a Master's in Fine Arts degree from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S. He is a teacher, an author of seven collections of poetry; an editor and a cultural worker. Recently, he was re-elected to head the National Commission for Culture and Arts (NCCA) Literary Arts Committee and was elected Commissioner to the NCCA Sub-Commission for the Arts. He taught at UP Manila and was a Chancellor of UP Mindanao in Davao City.

## First words

RICARDO M. DE UNGRIA

**W**ords are all we have, and the silence inside and around them. At the very moment of beauty and in the very face of it – when we know at all how to recognize beauty when it lies naked before us there is only silence.

At the moment of pain and in the very pang of it - when the world contracts and is felt in our very body - there is only silence.

At the very moment of joy and in the very burst of it -when the world expands and alongside it our own body - there is only silence.

At every birth and every beginning, and at every death and every end, silence attends and nurses us. Between the silence at birth and the silence at death, we have words. In the crack between two silences-, which is probably the same silence, we have words.

The belief is that words are all we have; the illusion is that words are all we have.

As writers, we have both - word and silence - but we never fully realize what it is that we really own. Why? Because at the beginning of our careers as writers, it is words that possess us - it is words that inhabit us- haunt us, use us. At the beginning of our careers as writers, words form our consciousness, and our consciousness, is of words. And this is as it should be.

As a beginner, the writer's first consciousness must be of words and not of sense. Only when the art of words has been mastered will sense make sense and take place.

When the beginning writer writes, s/he must learn to write with words-in spite of his belief that s/he is really writing with sense. The beginning writer must not be afraid to write with words - even if, at the same time, s/he must learn to fear

words because words take him/her too far out beyond images and landscapes s/he can hardly recognize and beyond meanings s/he has no present use for.

The beginning writer must realize that a failure in words is the greater failure than a failure in sense. When words fail, what sense can thrive on them? When the sense fails, is it not because of words?

The beginning writer attends writing workshops for various and equally credible reasons: to meet other writers and form a tribe of beginning writers; to meet and hear the more experienced writers speak on the art of writing; to subject his/her own work to the scrutiny of the elder writers and of his/her peers and learn, sometimes painfully, from the difference between the work as it is and the work as it should be; to locate his work in the spectrum of words of his/her peers; and even to see a place (like Iligan, or Baguio, or Dumaguete) for the first time. Whatever these reasons may be, the fact remains that in writing workshops it is the word that inspired and justifies discussions and it is the beginning writer's sense of the word that is put on the line.

The word and the writer's sense of it—this is what writing workshops are about. Not poetry but a poem and this poem's success and failures in beginning and ending, in versification and diction; not fiction, but a story and this story's successes and failures in development of plot and character, point of view and diction—these are the stuff workshops are made of. Whatever strengths and weaknesses a beginning writer is made aware of can only be strengths and weaknesses in relation to his/her mastery of or incompetence with words.

It is words that make or undo a writer.

When a writer grows, s/he grows into words and then into silence. When a writer's words become adumbrated by silence, the writer grows into sense. Sense and silence—these wait at the end of words.

The sound of words is not the same as the sound their meanings make. The sound their meanings make is a sound that is learned from books and that improves (or should improve) in the course of the writer's development. Here, the element of chance also plays an important role in the enrichment and evocation— even mystification— of meanings. The more a writer writes, the more he chances upon meanings and relations of meanings his persistence in writing becomes gifted with. On the other hand, the sound of words is a pool of sound we have swam in since birth and includes the voices of our fathers and mothers and grandparents and great-grandparents and our brothers and sisters; the intonations of our neighbors, the vendors on the marketplace, the drivers of buses and jeepneys, our teachers and classmates in school; the lilt and rhythm of lullabies we were put to

sleep or were wakened gently with, and the songs we sang to put the rainclouds away or to taunt a sulky loser or a beaten bully in school or in the neighborhood; the cutting accents of our father's anger, of the lewd range of streetfighting men; the rustlings and hesitant vacancies of fears and tremblings; and the unpredictable and hypnotic breath pauses and melodies of consolations, assurances, coaxing, and endearments heard from our mothers and put into effect into our loved ones and sweethearts. This pool of sounds is what we are least aware of when we write, but it is that which makes what we write distinctly our own and which – in good writers at least – successfully resists or disarms the devitalizing effects that are the inevitable consequences of writing in a second language like English – if we use a second language at all.

It is such pool of sound deep in the soul that makes silence tolerable and dangerously seductive and that makes the business of making words seems to be a deifying venture whose pleasures, brief as they are, weigh equal to its burdens.

Our first words are fated words, our first poems perhaps also our last. When we mind our words, we mind our fate – although, to end where I began, we must first word our words before our minds can give them a mind. And to word our words, we must learn to use not only our fingers but also our ears and our inner ear (once we locate it); and our lips and tongues that, across universes of harmonies and rhythms, blow life and our very own spirit into the words we make our own; and finally and eventually, the enormous silences we will grow courageously into and live with, and without which no creation in words is ever possible – nor, for that matter, any utterance at all of the word.