

INWW Photo



Gemino H. Abad recently retired as University Professor of English at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City. He took his MA and Ph.D. in English from the University of Chicago as a Rockefeller Fellow (1965-1975). He was Associate for Poetry and a former Director of the UP Creative Writing Center and a founding member and past chair of the Philippine Literary Arts Council. He has published five collections of poetry, four books on poetry and criticism and co-authored four literary anthologies. Among his numerous awards, he received the 1988 Manila Critics Circle's National Book Award for Poetry and the 1989 National Book Award for Anthology, the 1990 Asian Publishers Catholic Author Award, Gawad Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997, Chancellor's Award for Best Literary Work in 2002, the Patnubay ng Sining at Kalinangan sa Larangan ng Panitikan, the UP Outstanding Faculty Award and the UP Chancellor's Award as Best Office Administrator for management of the UP Creative Writing Center. He has been the first holder of the Carlos P. Romulo Professional Chair in Literature; the Irwin Chair for Literature; Fellow to the Cambridge Seminar at Cambridge University's Trinity College, the International Writers Program at the University of Iowa, the Oxford Conference on Teaching Literature Overseas, Corpus Christi College; and, Exchange Professor in Literature at St. Norbert College in Wisconsin and at Singapore Management University. In addition, he was cited as one of the "poets of note" in the 1992 Oxford Companion to the English Language. At present, he is Professor Emeritus at UP Diliman.

A Way Through Language

GEMINO H. ABAD
[for Jaime and Christine]

I wish to begin with my own perspective on literature and creative writing. For me, the poet is a figure for all writers, and poetry, a figure for all writing. The poet is he or she who finds a *Way through language* as through our daily traffic in words - a way through language by which one is able not only to communicate thought and feeling, but to express both.

Here is an important distinction between communication and expression. Communication is a facility with language, expression a creativity in language. To convey a meaning is to communicate, and it always has an addressee with whom the meaning is forged. Because the language is always inadequate, to express something is to approximate a certain meaningfulness -and it may have to await or create its addressee with whom lies an infinity of interpretation. Communication builds a community, expression affirms the individual: one stresses commonalities, shared insights, a common way of living; the other values differences, and exalts the uniqueness of every individual human being.

I said earlier that the poet finds a way through language. He does *communicate* thought and feeling, but his most typical encounter with language is an anguished experience of its inadequacy. That is the time when he finds himself on the verge of language; it is then that he must find a way through language by which to *express* a thought or feeling that the words cannot achieve. This isn't a matter of meaning, but *meaningfulness*, this isn't a matter of those meanings that even before speech our words already bear, but a matter of *what the words are made to do* by which a meaningfulness is evoked beyond the words themselves. In poetry, this meaningfulness is evoked by imagery and metaphor which go beyond

the words that offer them; in fiction, it is evoked by the story itself which transcends the words that construct it.

Not meaning, but meaningfulness -or what is called epiphany. Let me illustrate. We all know the meaning of the word "experience." As the Macquarie Dictionary defines it, an "experience" is "a particular instance of personally encountering or undergoing something." Meaning is definition: something has been made clear and definite, an idea of it has been formed, grasped, and understood. But the meaningfulness of the same word "experience" has to do with all that is real in regard to the word -all that is real that in fact gave us the word. The word "experience" has to do with faring and attempting, with peril and fear, with trial and proof and knowledge. The meaningfulness of the word "experience" has to do with all of that, exactly, because any man's living "experience" is the only point of contact with any reality; when one has an experience, one goes forth into the world, whether the inner or outer world, one tries and is tried, one meets with chance and sudden danger, and nothing is certain. *All that* is the meaningfulness of the word "experience."

I have dwelt on the word "experience" not only to illustrate meaningfulness. For to capture a meaningfulness, which is the task and burden of writing, is to capture a living experience: then all the words fall away, because the words have done their work, and what shines through is their meaningfulness, the very light of the living experience. As though, when we read a story or poem, we live again, not as live from day to day in a kind of oblivion, but in full awareness.

I said earlier that the writer finds a way through language. When he does, he reinvents the language, that is to say, he finds his language again *within*-within itself, and within himself. To find the language again within itself is to discover that any language is already given, that any language is already a fixed way of perceiving reality; we see only what our words in daily use permit. So, one must find another way through language to see other possibilities of being. To find the language again within oneself is to discover how, before words or speech, one thinks and feels. This for me is creative *writing* -to find the language again within, by which one transcends language through the expression of what one thinks and feels in the full awareness of a living experience. The result is literature.

It is something like this: on the one hand, we have the world we live in, including people; on the other, the language we speak. Now, because the human being alone is conscious of death, he alone has a great yearning for this world. He longs for the world to be the word incarnate. This is to translate: to ferry across the words, to carry the world over to text. Any language then by itself is already translation. But the world being unconscious resists the translation. The living reality

always resists its translation. The writer is he who overcomes the resistance almost successfully.

So writing too is essentially translation: we ferry across our words those thoughts and feelings which are the meaningfulness of our living experience but which have not till then found their expression or which need again to be expressed in a new and living form, that they may still live after our living. What is expressed, through words and the images or myths that they are made to evoke, is an insight into our humanity. By insight I mean an illumination of a thought which no idea conveys, or a radiance of feeling which no thought catches.

Thought is living and 'unformulable'; the idea is thought already formulated. Feeling, on the other hand, is our first language—a language without the words; it is also the most honest part of our nature. If this is so, if writing is expression of meaningfulness and insight, then language is only our first fiction—our first seeing, thinking, feeling—while the *working* of language, its being wrought into poem or story, is our second fiction, by which our humanity is created anew.

Such then is my perspective on literature and creative writing, and in the light, I believe that our writers deserve a more serious consideration of what they have achieved. Indeed, I think of Philippine literature as an archipelago of letters because we have many languages, including English. Our English is already our own, nothing less than a national language. Our "regional" languages are too as much *Filipino* as that evolving Tagalog-based language that we hope would someday, through great writing, become truly our national language. But how subtly the term "regional" marginalizes! To call Tagalog Filipino is to privilege it, as though our other languages were not Filipino or cannot express the Filipino. The fact of the matter is, any language can express anything, because writing is a matter of what words are made to do such that what is written can, through the evocative power of the imagination/ transcend the labile meanings of the words themselves.

As teachers of English, we should privilege our own literature in English as models of good writing precisely because (1) the culture and the experience from which our own literary works arise are our own history as a people, and because (2) these works show how English as medium of expression operates to shape our own thoughts and feelings. By this way of the imagination, our writers have created a clearing of our own within that adopted language called English. We have in fact recolonized it to our own image.

It is really quite ironic that, through our education system, we are more knowledgeable about Anglo-American literature than about our own. There is

also a poignant irony in the fact that Professor Edna Manlapaz and I should have come upon our first published verses in English at the American Embassy Library in Manila. There we found a copy of *The Filipino Students' Magazine*, published in Berkeley, California, in 1905. This discovery was sometime in 1985 during the course of our research for the historical anthology of Filipino poetry in English, *Man of Earth* (1989). Before then, there was no mention anywhere of our first poem in English, Ponciano Reyes' "The Flood" (April, 1905). So, in a manner of speaking, our ignorance of our own literary works in English stretches from 1905 to 1985. How much darker must our ignorance be of "our own literature in our various indigenous languages? I refuse the word "vernacular" because the Latin *vernacula* means "a slave born in his master's house." "The Flood," a long narrative poem of 42 verses, is truly remarkable for its subject-the plight of our working people who live along the Pasig River when, during a storm, it overflows its banks. By that subject, the poem disproves the popular notion that our early verses in English were simply romantic and escapist. "The Flood" gives us our first image of the Filipino in our second colonial language: the common *tao* as boat people, fishers, farmers, and traders toiling on the Pasig under the threat of a coming storm. It is truly remarkable that in our first poem in English, a foreign language whose idiom and syntax were still unfamiliar, the poet's quest for the Filipino began with those among us who, without the writer, have no voice else. Our first poem in English begins, even in thralldom to the colonial language, a long tradition of the socially committed writer from Fernando M. Maramag through Carlos Bulosan to Alfredo Navarro Salanga.

It isn't my intention to give you a literary history. My chief point is simply that we alone are at fault when we have little appreciation of our own literary works where we interpret *us* to ourselves. A people is only as strong as its memory. But sometimes, in the frenzy of nationalism, we even dismiss those images of ourselves that we have forged in the colonial languages, as though our own native tongues were never colonized. The very subtlety of the colonial ravage must suggest that we read very carefully our own works, to see just where we have been *spoken for*. We would have to be quite wary also of borrowed theories -Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, other intellectual post-modernist imports infected with the spiritual anguish of the West -lest by their entrancing light we are disabled from seeing ourselves.

It may be remarked that the Filipino experience can be represented only in Filipino -that is, in Tagalog, in Cebuano, in Iloko, in Hiligaynon. But that is to misconceive language. Language shapes the things it expresses; it is, as a given historical medium or cultural artifact, itself already a fixed way of looking at reality

(thereby creating a particular version of that reality). Whether English or Tagalog, language is always already a partial representation of reality, already a received interpretation of the world shared by the community of the language's speakers. But the poet sees things through his own sensibility and imagination, by his own response to life and the world; he may see things differently from the usual saying in the language, from the way of looking that inheres in the given language that he is using; therefore, he must work the language that he knows best to make it express his own way of seeing and feeling. This is what I mean when I say he must reinvent the language.

So, the poet is always looking for his language. But in the way, he is also looking for his country, because one's country is first of all how one imagines her. In our literary history -Balagtas writing in Tagalog, Rizal writing in Spanish-*Inang Bayan* is the writer's first muse. As readers, we must look in our poetry for those images that we have of ourselves by which we recognize our nativity -images forged from the given languages that our poets worked from (Tagalog, Spanish, English, etc.). We know our external history-the politics, the economics, the events and circumstances, past and present, and their conflicting interpretations -but the deeper significance of our history as a people must lie in how every generation remembers our past and dreams of our future, what images we create from our own scene and circumstances, what symbols and metaphors we find within ourselves to signify the way we think and feel and so justify the way we live. Our poets have most to do with shaping that spiritual landscape. If a country is essentially an act of imagination, it can fairly be said that our poets create our country.

I recommend the workshop approach in creative writing courses as one effective way of teaching English through models of good writing by Filipino writers. Indeed, the students may also be encouraged to express themselves imaginatively by probing their own experiences and exploring the resources and experimenting with the possibilities of English as a linguistic medium. The very fact that the student deals in daily life with English and, his own native tongue (Tagalog, Sugbuanon, etc.) may even be a distinct advantage: that is, if he is sensitive and observant, he might become more familiar with that space between languages where precisely the most profound poetry is wrought.

My assumptions for using the workshop approach are two-fold:

1. The very process of writing recreates the language. The purpose of the workshop approach is to show how this takes place. In teaching a literary piece, one simply grants (as a working hypothesis in interpretation) an end

or goal that the writer has set out to accomplish. You ask: "What is the story's point? What is the poem's insight?" You have to have a hypothesis about that point or insight; then you ask how the story or poem succeeded in enforcing that point or expressing that insight.

2. The literary work, when it is finished, shows how language has been employed to achieve certain effects by which the story's or poem's end (or artistic goal) has been accomplished. The purpose of the workshop approach is to make the student aware of linguistic and rhetorical resources and their unlimited possibilities, and thereby enhance his sense for language. This sense or instinct for language is at the very base of proficiency in any language.

I should perhaps stress that in the workshop approach, a close analytical reading of the text is crucial. But by "close, analytical reading," I mean a reading without any theoretical presupposition about literature; I mean that, as reader, I have no interest in affirming or denying a particular theory or critical stance in regard to literary works in general. What I wish to stress is simply this: When you read, you are not a passive consumer of a product, you are an active producer of meaning. This is why I encourage my students to enter the story's experience, the poem's world. You might ask: is not that already a theoretical presupposition, a critical stance? Yes, of course, and it cannot be helped; on the other hand, when you read, you must be reading about something; besides, what is really important (another presupposition) is not the theory or critical standpoint, but my attitude: I am not interested in denying or affirming any theory of literature so that I may be wholly and purely engaged in and with the reading.

So then, I say that when you read a story, you are responding to a living human experience even if it were only fiction; when you read a poem, you are engaged with a way of thinking and feeling that reveals a unique and particular human nature. You must for the moment surrender -you must, for example, see and feel about things the way others (say, the narrator, or the story's characters, or the poem's speaker) see and feel, so that, when you make a judgment, you have first lived another life (to put it strongly), you have first considered the other person's point of view before you favor your own. It is also educative for the reader to make himself aware of how, as the story or poem progresses, he (a human being) is responding to it as a representation of a human experience or a way of thinking or a nerve of feeling; and make himself aware too of how exactly the author is

proceeding such that he (the reader) is reacting in this way or that. By cultivating this awareness, one could begin to appreciate what the author has accomplished—all that the author has done with the sole means of language.

That is the paradox of writing—the writer is both a creature of language and its creator. Language is all-important to the poet, and yet it isn't language that rules the work of imagination.

Conclusion

By way of concluding, I wish to stress that literature, like anything else, changes. What we traditionally call story, poem, novel, or play are only possible forms of the language. If so, then they also secrete the rules and criteria of their possibility. The writer is always in quest of other possible forms. This is the secret of his perseverance as writer.

As forms of the language, story, poem, or play (which are convenient labels) enact what we are as human beings—what, in our individual lives and in our common history, we have become and may be becoming. As symbolic enactment, story, poem, and play are reinventions of the imagination, by which we create the meanings which help us live, through which our lives achieve a certain meaningfulness.