

Photo from Isagani R. Cruz My Blog



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# Writers under the Rule of the Lawless

ISAGANI R. CRUZ

**E**verywhere the rule of law is in retreat. International Law has ceased to be. A small group of a dozen or so countries invaded the second largest oil-producing country in the world. The United Nations, the only international body mandated by international law to keep the peace and to declare countries in breach of its resolutions, could only look on helplessly, watching the invasion on television. International Law requires a reason for waging war, but no reason at all was required for Iraq to be invaded, desecrated, and obliterated. International Law requires that prisoners of war be treated as human beings with human rights and human dignity, yet Guantanamo has existed for more than a year now. International Law requires that combatants keep their conflicts to themselves, yet Palestinian and Israeli terrorists have been killing each other's civilians routinely, mechanically, efficiently, and heartlessly. Islamic Arab terrorists used civilian planes to kill civilians on September 11, 2001; using the Islamic precept of an eye for an eye rather than the Christian precept of turning the other cheek. Christian American terrorists used weapons of mass destruction to kill civilians in March, 2003.

National Law has ceased to be. The list of the top one thousand Philippine taxpayers does not include the names of the top one thousand Philippine peso and dollar earners. No one minds, or even seems to know, the traffic laws, the laws on drug-dealing, even the laws on murder. The police are the first to break the laws they are supposed to enforce. The President is the first to try to break the term limit that the Constitution imposes; in fact, the President is the first to seek a way to break away from every provision of the Constitution that she can get away with, for the sole purpose of perpetrating her incoherent, inefficient,

idiosyncratic, and idiotic hold on power. There are foreign troops on Philippine soil. English is the primary medium of instruction. Children succeed their parents to political posts. All these are against the Constitution, but the Constitution, alas, gathers dust in some library shelf somewhere, waiting to be read.

Literary Law has ceased to be. The Tagalog prescriptions of Francisco Balagtas and Jose Rizal and Virgilio Almario, the strict norms of Jose Garcia Villa and Clodualdo del Mundo and Edilberto Tiempo and even the living National Artist Edith Tiempo, the high standards of Leona Florentino and Angela Manalang Gloria and Alejandro Abadilla and Lina Espina Moore, the tennis net of Robert Frost, the prosody of Aphra Behn and Emily Dickinson – all these no longer hold the allegiance nor even the attention of our writers today. Even the moment of literary theory has passed; the excitement of post structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism, postmarxism, and various other posts and outposts of creative philosophizing about and within literature came and went, came and went so quickly they will soon be mere footnotes in literary history. Without God, wrote Fyodor Dostoyevsky, everything is permitted; without literary rules, everything is permitted and nothing is permeated with insight or beauty or permanence.

In the world, in the nation, in the community of writers, the lawless rule and survive, the lawless invade and exploit, the lawless win awards and take home the money, the lawless wield the power of fear and trembling, the lawless are the law.

What do writers have to do under the rule of the lawless?

Our ancient duty as writers remains. Our first and our only duty is to tell the truth.

Ask not what Pontius Pilate asked. Ask not what, before him, was asked by Emperor Shang thousands of years ago in China, Plato a couple of thousand years ago in Greece, Rizal and Abadilla and Villa and Del Mundo and Almario less than a couple of hundred years ago in our own country. Ask not what the rules are. Ask instead what we can do to set up some rules, some sense, some law in the writing of literature.

Creative writers are not supposed to establish nations, to formulate constitutions, to pass laws. On the contrary, creative writers are supposed to break laws, to break the limits of the human imagination, to expand the frontiers of human knowledge and emotion and achievement. But in a world without laws, the lawmaker and not the lawbreaker is the creative one.

It is time to create order out of literary chaos.

Let us talk of specific, concrete, and doable courses of personal, literary action.

First, readers read what writers write. Unless we write, readers will keep on reading Shang, Plato, Rizal, Abadilla, Villa, Del Mundo, and Almario, not to mention all the National Artists in Literature save one (Villa himself, Amado V. Hernandez, Nick Joaquin, Carlos P. Romulo, Francisco Arcellana, Levi Celerio, N.V.M. Gonzalez, Carlos Quirino, Rolando Tinio, and F. Sionil Jose). Except for Edith Tiempo, all are male. I say "we," but heterosexual biological male that I am, I really mean, "they" or "you" – they or you the writers that are biologically female. There is no point shouting feminist slogans, asking for equal representation in canonical listings, in textbooks, in literary histories, in literary prizes and grants and workshops. There are no products of the female imagination available for all to read. Women writers must write, or they should just shut up and suffer the patriarchal posturing of biologically male writers. If readers of all genders and sexual orientations and identities and identifications are going to remove from their minds any sexist, heterosexist, homophobic, or colonialist prejudices, writers from the fringes, from the places and times marginalized by the wealthy external colonial and internal colonial powers, from the back pages or indexes of books rather than from the table of contents and from front covers and from book blurbs, must sit up and write, must boot up and write, must write and publish and write and publish and write and publish until their writings come out of their ears and the ears and eyes and hearts and minds of their own and not their own readers. The first thing all writers must do – and not only the writers that are biologically female or psychologically female or sociologically or historically colonized – is to write. It is our duty, our only duty, our solemn duty, to write, and to write a lot and to write well.

Second, languages live when languages are used. Writers have always been and will always be guardians of language, but not only of language but of languages. If the languages of Mindanao die, the fault is solely that of the writers in Mindanao. We cannot blame politics or war or epidemics or education or anything or anyone else if our languages die. We can and should blame only the writers. Unless writers write in Davaweño, Kalagan, Kamayo, Mamanwa, Mandaya, Sangil, and Tagakaulu, Davaweño, Kalagan, Kamayo, Mamanwa, Mandaya, Sangil, and Tagakaulu will die. Unless writers write in Kalibugan, Subanon, and Subanun, Kalibugan, Subanon, and Subanun will die. Unless writers write in Ilanum, Magindanao, and Maranao, Ilanum, Magindanao, and Maranao will die. Unless writers write in Binukid, Dibabawon, Manobo, and Tagabawa, Binukid, Dibabawon, Manobo, and Tagabawa will die. Unless writers write in

Jama Mapun, Sama, and Yakan, Jama Mapun, Sama, and Yakan will die. Unless writers write in Bagobo, Blaan, Tboli, and Tiruray, Bagobo, Blaan, Tboli, and Tiruray will die. Unless writers write in Chavacano, Chavacano will die. Unless writers write in Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilocano, and Tagalog, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilocano, and Tagalog will die. Unless writers write in Filipino, Filipino will die. It is our duty, our only duty, our solemn duty, to write in our own languages, and to write a lot and to write well in these languages.

Third, imagined communities remain imagined as communities only if writers from these communities continue to imagine and to write. Mindanao always thinks of itself as the Other of Manila, but that is exactly the same as thinking that the Philippines is the Other of the United States. True, Manila is the center of political and economic power, just as the United States is the center of military power, but politics and economics and arms are not the center of the universe, nor the center of history, nor the center of everything that is real. No one remembers the political and economic and military figures of the past as much as they remember, just to name a few, Homer, Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Rizal. The centers of historical power are not in the great empires of the earth, but in the great imaginations of the soul. All great political and economic and military empires have turned to dust, have been uncovered by Ozymandias as not worth recovering, have disappeared from everything except encyclopedias, but the great writing of the past has remained the great writing of the present. Shakespeare is as alive now as he was four centuries ago. Rizal is as alive now as he was a century ago. We converse with dead poets as though they were still alive in society. In fact, they still live in society, because dead poets are not dead as long as they remain poets. If we want the Philippines or Mindanao or Iligan or any other place we treasure to remain alive in history ten, twenty, fifty centuries from now, we must write from within our real communities. We must write about people we know, places we frequent, times we live in. Unless we write about and on and in and for Mindanao, Mindanao will die. It is our duty, our only duty, our solemn duty, to write about Mindanao and about the Philippines, and to write a lot and to write well about Mindanao and about the Philippines.

Fourth, the law will prevail only if there is a law. If we do not want to write sonnets with fourteen lines, if we do not want to do haiku with seventeen syllables, if we do not want to use rhyme to call attention to key words in our poems, if we do not want to use only two plot points in our stories, if we do not want to use dialects and idiolects to differentiate characters in our plays, if we do not want to follow grammatical rules that we break only to make strong stylistic and deliber-

ate, deliberated points, if we do not want to follow laws, then we should formulate our own laws, but we must have laws. We cannot write without a net, whether that net was placed there by writer-referees and critic-umpires or whether we weaved the net ourselves. Writing without laws is not writing. Even in chaos theory and in complexity theory (now the leading buzzwords in most intellectual circles around the world), chaos is seen as ordered within more comprehensive equations. Albert Einstein could not believe that God would play dice with the world, but the human being is made in the image of Allah and not Allah in the image of the human being; our puny minds cannot comprehend the ways of the Almighty. In complexity theory, chaos is not chaotic at all, because it can be understood through a general theory, not a special theory, of entropy. There is no place for chaos in writing, unless that chaos is entropic, unless the chaos can eventually be seen as creative, creative in the Judaic sense of making sense out of the seemingly senseless, creative in the literary sense of being merely paradoxical, merely seeming to be contradiction but actually synthesizing into a higher realm of meditation and contemplation and, yes, ecstatic vision. It is our duty, our only duty, to write in impeccable language and form, and to write a lot and to write well, very well.

Fifth, our reach must extend beyond our grasp, as Robert Browning would put it. Everyone else can worry about the food on the table or the balance in the bank account or the education of the children or the rights of the unborn or the suffering of civilians and soldiers and Iraqis and American young women and men. Everyone else can watch CNN and BBC and ABS-CBN and GMA. But we writers cannot be bound by the everyday, by the reality and the realities of life as lived on earth. We writers must not think only of today, nor only of yesterday, nor only of tomorrow. We writers must not be bound by time nor place nor people nor any other dimension of what is real. What is real to us writers is not what is visible to the eye nor even, despite Antoine Saint-Exupery, what is invisible to the eye. We writers must transcend the binariness, the bipolarity, the duality of stifling two-value logic; we writers must transcend even the fuzzy logic of artificial intelligence or even the human intuition of human geniuses. We writers must reach what is unreachable, must dream what is undreamable, must go beyond even Don Quixote de la Mancha, who dreamt only of the impossible. We writers must go way beyond the impossible; we writers must *be* the impossible. It is impossible to find human beings that will kill everyone, not only their fathers and mothers in the Sigmund Freud way, not only their fellow human beings in the George W. Bush or Osama bin Laden way, not only the earth itself in the multinational, transnational, meganational way, but that impossibility incarnates itself in us writers. We should

be ready to kill everyone, including our young selves, our own youth, our own drafts, our own past and present and future, in our drive to write. Alfred Yuson says that revising a draft is like killing our own babies, because the words we once wrote with pencil or pen or typewriter or computer or palm or cellphone must now face the guillotine of critical thought, of afterthought, of thought itself. All writers die more than once; all true writers die every day, every minute of the day. Writers die every time they have to kill their own words. Their own babies, their own creations.

That is what this 10<sup>th</sup> Iligan National Writers Workshop is all about. This workshop is all about killing our own creations, killing the images we have made of ourselves, killing the babies made in our own image. The oldest myth in the world, the oldest myth in Philippine epics and therefore in Philippine narrative, is the myth of the resurrection. Unless the grain of rice dies, it remains a grain of rice, but if it dies, it can become not just a plant, not just a cathedral, not just a new earth and a new heaven, but a new work of art. Unless the first draft of our masterpiece is thrown to the fires of hell, unless we follow what American novelist Walker Percy did to his first novel, which was to throw the entire manuscript into the Mississippi River, unless we ourselves do what Villa used to do with the manuscripts submitted to him by his poetry students in New York, which was to throw the manuscripts into a trashcan, unless we willingly and painfully pour red ink over our first draft, the first draft of our masterpiece will remain a first draft and will never become a masterpiece. It is our duty, our only duty, our solemn duty, not only to write, but to rewrite, and to rewrite a lot and to rewrite well.

Welcome to the world of literary workshops. May the tears you shed in the course of the workshop water the fertile ground of your imagination. May you never, ever, let go of the dream of becoming a writer. May you become what only a handful of human beings since the beginning of the human race have become—writers.