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# Writing in a Time of Terror and the (mis) management of grief

CHARLSON ONG

Once when I was as young as many of you here, sitting where many of you now sit, I wondered, as many of you must be wondering now, how they choose keynote speakers. I wondered too, in silence--as you too must do so in silence--what such speakers are supposed to do. Should the speaker inspire? Cajole? Castigate? Prognosticate? Prophecy?

I believe it was Dr. Bien Lumbera who spoke during the opening of the first Iligan workshop of which I was privileged to be a fellow. But to be honest, I don't quite remember exactly what Bien said on that occasion as I've been with him in many other workshops and conferences ever since.

What I do remember of our workshop was Felino Garcia as a very rotund, and very gay *dysebel*, wrapped in his malong bathing in the spring waters of Timoga. He reminded me more of a beached whale than a mermaid on that occasion but Felino's comic talents and sense of humor, not to mention literary insights, made it a memorable workshop for me.

Similarly, you will remember mostly of this workshop such moments as well as challenge long held notions of beauty and order in the known universe.

Not that the panel discussions and the critiquing of mentors and fellows are of little value. Far from it. But what you hear in the formal sessions will likely merger in time with all the other stuff you would have heard in many other classes, workshops, conferences--that is, if you do continue with the writing or academic life--like a river fed by many streams.

And yes, you'd probably wonder ten years, or ten days, from now what on earth I said--save perhaps, for Felino having once resembled a beached whale.



And, really, it is best for us to remember of one another what we write than what we say, especially to each other and after dark and after beer. But I am supposed to be profound and respectable this morning, so let me try.

An artist without an art form is a dangerous person, reads a line from Toni Morrison's *Sula*. And indeed many of the characters in Morrisons's works, especially her women, seek to transform their own lives into art. Amid the squalor of slavery and post slavery, denied the possibilities for decent livelihood, much less self expression, these characters often defy convention and follow the urgings of an inner spirit to produce a life that, if not, arguably, we live or well remembered is at least *remembered*. At the end of her short life, Sula-ill, alone and despised by her neighbors-says to her best friend Nel: At least my lonely is mine. Your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else's lonely? And, perhaps, we might add, to die of somebody else's lonely?

Rebellion in art, says Albert Camus, is the refusal to be a victim. In and through art, the victim's tale sees the light of history or becomes its own history. In this light, there are many histories rather than a single narrative so that the notion of an End to History becomes absurd for the tale that Francis Fukuyama claims to have ended is but the one he chose to tell.

I do not agree, however, with the notion that all truths are equal. Certainly, the planet earth I think I live on is round, the heaven above me is about 100 kms. of polluted air. And the hell below, mostly molten rock. The artist or writer as historian must tell his or her tale in the light of reason as much as revelation, clinical data as well as tradition. It can only be a story of his or her time, suspect to both past and future.

When the artist is ready, society may provide the means for the telling of the tale: in song or in dance, in water or in stone, in print or celluloid, by body or by spirit, mummified or digitized. But what of those whose circumstances preclude any non violent mode of expression?

Is destruction, including self-destruction, the obverse of creation? Is there a suicide bomber lurking within every artist? To the Chinese the God of poetry, Guan Yu, is also the God of war. To Hindus, Brahma the creator and Siva the destroyer are two Gods of the cosmic triumvirate.

I think it was Henrik Ibsen who said that the fantasy of any writer, at least for a certain season in one's career, should be to torpedo the Ark-that is, Noah's Ark-rather than to pick the survivors ala Noah.

No doubt the events of 911 and their consequences have cast a shadow over our work as writers. Already, fictionists like Salman Rushdie and Murakami



have responded with important works. As a nation, we have been victim to political and sectarian violence even before the catastrophe in New York. You in Mindanao have had to live with war or the threat of it for many decades. But now, our involvement in America's war against terror threatens to engage us in a broader conflict.

Historically, conflict and catastrophe often bring out the best in artists. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* deal with the drama wrought by profound changes in Russia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. WW II spawned such novels as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, and Stevan Javellana's *Without Seeing the Dawn*. The Spanish Civil War inspired Picasso's *Guernica*. Lu Xun wrote *Ah Q* during the 1920's as China suffered imperial collapse, strife and foreign aggression. So, too, the excesses of the "Cultural Revolution" of the 1960's became the subject of the new wave of Chinese cinema as well as the work of Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian. Apartheid in South Africa was the canvas across which Nadine Gordimer and Coetzee painted their intimate literary portraits.

Political strife and terrorism have been the subject of good fiction. One of my favorite stories and one which I often teach in class is the *Management of Grief* by Bharati Mukherjee. It is the story of Shaila, an Indian-Canadian woman who along with her neighbors in Toronto have just lost their loved ones as a plane enroute from India explodes in mid-air. They are the victims of the very sectarian violence they had left India in order to avoid. Shaila too has lost her husband and son but being among the more Westernized of the community, Shaila is recruited by the social worker Judith Templeton to help the other victims deal with the catastrophe.

Shaila's most urgent task is to convince an old Sikh couple to sign documents which will entitle them to the benefits left behind by their son who was aboard the flight. The couple refuses to do so as it remains their duty to hope for their son's survival. Shaila realizes the futility of trying to explain one side of the cultural divide to the other. Grief, after all, like anger and hatred cannot be managed in the manner a modern bureaucracy wishes it could. In the end, Shaila manages her own grief by returning to Toronto after a brief sojourn in Calcutta, in order to 'carry on' what she and her dead husband had begun. Though seemingly affirmative, the story's ending suggests darker possibilities.

The management of public emotion as much as war technology is a task confronting political leaders whenever nations face adversity. Has the war on terror been mainly to flush out Bin Laden or seek out weapons of mass destruc-



tion or to assuage the anger, salve the pain of the American public? Are emotions being allowed to boil over across Central and West Asia?

In Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, the Hindu girl Lata, pained by the suffering caused by the violence between India's Hindus and Muslims shortly before that nation's partition in 1949, give up her own desire for her Muslim suitor, Kabir, and marries instead her co-religionist Haresh—who is himself forced to give up his suit for a Sikh girl. Two victims of tradition decide to forsake passion which has wreaked so much havoc, in order to do their bit in restoring decency in their world.

It is no wonder that works which deal with political and cultural strife are often written by authors of multi-cultural backgrounds. More than others they appreciate the view from opposing camps, more than others, they court the displeasure of those who brook no re-valuation of their own beliefs—as in the case of Rushdie.

His work in the French resistance during the Second World War led Jean Paul Sartre towards the existentialism for which he is best known. Reflecting on Nazism, Sartre declared that: Evil is not an appearance... knowing its cause does not dispel it... it is not opposed to Good as a confused idea is to a clear one... it is not the effect of passions which might be cured, of a fear which might be overcome, of a passing aberration which might be excused, of an ignorance which might be enlightened... it can no way be diverted, brought back, reduced, and incorporated into idealistic humanism. Perhaps, a day will come when a happy age... will see in this suffering and shame one of the paths which led to peace. But we are not on the side of history already made. Therefore, in spite of ourselves, we come to the conclusion, which will sound shocking to lofty souls—Evil cannot be redeemed.

A challenging thought in these times of terror and counter terror and evil mongering. Still, the problem of evil is one that writers always deal with. Every short story, every novel or drama is about Good and Evil though not necessarily in biblical or religious terms. But what differentiates our work from that of the sociologist is the moral choice that our characters must make at the climax of the tale.

It is the terror of that decision that confronts every story. The terror of the void that annuls all meaning. In the face of that terror the writer only has language and memory.

A writer is an editor of memory. Writing well is the best revenge, someone once said. In writing you can stand up once again to the school bully or steal kisses from the school beauty this time with better results. In writing we make the



loves we should have made, wage war we should have waged. It doesn't always make up for the real thing, but it does have its rewards.

Remembering is the only way to learn, the only way to grow. The fear of death is not fear of losing the future but of losing the past. It is the fear of forgetfulness, of Alzheimer's. But remembering is also the great problem of politics. When a great power wants to dominate a smaller one, says Milan Kundera, it uses the method of organized forgetting.

Every song, every story is a hedge against death, against forgetfulness. We remember for ourselves, we remember for others.

There are no formulas for writing or writing well. Anyone who says otherwise is just trying to earn a living. But I have always gone by what I call the four Ms of writing—Myth and Memory, Magic and Metaphor. If you are true to your memories, the myths will reveal themselves. If you serve well your metaphors, the magic will descend.

We live in dangerous times. The stakes are too high for us to leave the management of emotions and perceptions around the world to politicians, clerics, terror mongers, or to CNN. We must do our part. As writers we must stand by the integrity of the word, we write as well for those who cannot speak, for where words may not be heard, says the anonymous poet of Palestine, bombs rejoice.

When I was as young as most of you I said that I wrote because I was the only way I knew how to live. And that remains true today. I write the way I do because it is the only way I know how. Often, I find no other cause for writing except to echo James Baldwin that: although the tale of how we suffer and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be told. There is no other tale to tell, it is our only light in all this darkness.

But I say the writer today must also be an interpreter of grief. In the end, like Shaila, we too might find it impossible to be a bridge between cultures, to translate meanings; to hold the center. Life might just be too powerful for art. But the attempt should be worth the effort. I have no more desire to torpedo the ark, to fancy myself a Brahma or Shiva but only a Vishnu, a preserver.

In days of anthrax and HIV we might be reminded, by the master story teller himself, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, how the human spirit has always prevailed over the ravages of time, bombs, and viruses.

Finally, as the main preoccupation of any writers workshop is really to gossip about writers, let me share this anecdote about two of our great fictionists. When Manuel Arguilla was executed by the Japanese during WWI, Francisco Arcellana was so pained he wrote that Arguilla had no business dying. "He was

no patriot," Franz wrote of Arguilla, "he was a poet, we have many patriots,"

Arcellana lamented, and "too few poets." I pray that I will never have to say the same for anyone of you.

But that's not the story. This, according to Franz was what Manuel Arguilla wrote in his dedication to Arcellana when he had his copy of Arguilla's book signed: Dear Franz, more life in your art, less art in your life.

I suggest the same for all of us. Have a wonderful workshop.