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His first novel, *The Sky Over Dimas*, received the Grand Prize for the Novel from the 2002 Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature and was published the following year by De La Salle University Press. In 2004 it received the National Book Award for Fiction from the Manila Critics Circle and the St. Miguel Febres Cordero Research Award. In 2005 it was awarded the Madrigal-Gonzales Best First Book Award.

contributed photo

He has received fellowships from the writing workshops at the University of the Philippines (1992), the National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete City (1993), Iligan Writers Workshop and Literature Teachers Conference at the Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology (1995), and the University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing (Likhaan) for the 2003 Kumustahan Writers Seminar. In 2005 he returned to the Iligan National Writers Workshop to deliver that year's keynote address. In 2003 he was awarded the Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Fellowship for Fiction, and from 2005 to 2006 he was Writer-in-Residence at De La Salle University.

His short stories, some of them awarded with the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature (in 1992 and 1998), are collected in the book *On Cursed Ground and Other Stories*, published by the University of the Philippines Press in 2004. The collection was awarded the National Book Award for Fiction by the Manila Critics Circle in 2004.

As an undergraduate at De La Salle University majoring in Communication Arts, he produced a short feature on video entitled *Huni* as his thesis. It went on to win First Prize for Short Feature Video from the 1991 Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Video at Pelikula, and the Best Short Film Award from the Film Academy of the Philippines in 1992. That year he also received a Young Filmmakers Grant from the Manila Film Festival and produced a 35mm short film entitled *Ubo*, which was awarded Second Prize for Short Experimental Film by the 1993 Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Video at Pelikula.

More recent film projects include the short features *143: Lovers Discourse* and *Pass*, as well as the short documentary *Lantern Keeper*. Groyon also wrote the screenplay for a Cinemalaya 2008 finalist, *Nametz!*, set in Negros Occidental.

He recently edited a Philippine PEN anthology of new fiction in English entitled *A Different Voice: Fiction by Young Filipino Writers* and two anthologies of flash fiction entitled *Very Short Stories for Harried Readers* and *Mga Kuwentong Paspasan*.

The Crisis of the Filipino Writer

VICENTE GARCIA GROYON III

In 1995 I attended the second Iligan National Writers Workshop as a Writing Fellow. Today, ten years later, I feel no more prepared to address this audience than I would have ten years ago.

A writer may achieve a level of mastery and confidence, perhaps after decades of writing and volumes of published work. Until this happens, the basic problems of the loneliest art remain the same—the writer turns into a beginner every time he is confronted with a blank page.

This state of constantly beginning—the eternal square one—is, must be, the default condition of the writer. Nothing can ever be taken for granted, and nothing can ever be fixed, if literature is to remain vital, fresh, and relevant.

In a situation such as mine, of a writer who is neither masterly nor confident, who is addressing other writers about an avocation at which everyone is always a beginner, I cannot offer pithy proclamations or prescriptions. I also cannot claim to be any sort of expert on the study of literature, and therefore cannot educate you on the finer points of the writing done by Filipinos. I am, at best, someone who has gone a little farther than other writers of my generation. I am someone who stands at what he perceives to be an odd but significant juncture in the history of creative writing in the Philippines, and who is trying to make out the road ahead as it disappears into a hazy future. This is what I hope to do this morning—to share problems and questions that I find myself grappling with, and that I hope other writers are grappling with as well, if only because it makes the work a little less lonely.

I'm 34 years old. I cannot pinpoint the exact date, but I know that I decided

to become a writer sometime in my early teens, on a humid, sluggish summer afternoon, when I stumbled upon the short stories that my parents had written when they were in their twenties.

Up to my grade school graduation, writing was no more than a special ability that I could exploit from time to time, for attention or rewards. One lazy day, while rummaging through my parents' personal effects, I made the first discovery that changed the way I looked at writing.

I found some papers, stapled into two sheaves. They were stories that my mother had written for a college class on the short story. I read them, and felt a numb shock—the kind of surprise that comes with unexpected recognition. Unlike other fiction I had read before, I understood what the stories were talking about, but in a direct way, because of my personal knowledge of the writer. The first one presented a girl's thoughts during the moments after a fight with her older sister, and it was easy to imagine my mother and my aunt as teenagers, bickering and then refusing to speak to each other. The second was about a girl coming to terms with her father's death, and I also could see what my grandfather's death must have meant to my mother. Because of my special knowledge of the stories' provenance, I began to discern how the process of writing fiction might go if undertaken seriously.

I concluded that all other fiction must be like that—that each story comes from something very personal in the writer, and it is this that gives the story its force, its power. This was my first real taste of Philippine fiction, and of the nature of literary truth.

Another thing I discovered was a small pile of old magazines—*Philippine Graphic, Free Press*, and *Focus*— carefully stored in a large manila envelope. I wondered what was so special about these magazines until I spotted my father's name in one issue's table of contents. These magazines contained the stories he wrote and published while he was studying at the Ateneo, and a few years after. I had actually seen him typing out a story or two when I was younger, but I had never thought of reading the piles of newsprint he produced. I went through the stories in those magazines in a single afternoon and experienced another kind of shock.

My father has never been the openly affectionate type, and I was not very close to him in those days. I knew him, yet I didn't know him. As I read his stories, though, I heard him speaking to me in a way that he never had before, and because of that, I felt that I understood him a little better. He did not write about recognizable characters or places, at least not recognizable to me, but I recognized

him in those stories. Those stories, filled with 1960s angst and alienation as they were, appealed to a place deep inside me, and it was more because of this connection than anything else that I resolved to keep writing. I also had angst; I also felt alienated, and that afternoon was the first time that I felt a kinship with my father. I was vaguely pleased with this feeling, and decided that I wanted to learn how to do to others what he had done to me through his fiction.

What these twin discoveries revealed to me was the immense power that a writer can wield—the ability to move people without being in the same room as they, without even knowing them, or being aware that you had entered their lives in an intense and personal manner.

I haven't looked back since.

I believe in what I do, which is ostensibly the writing of "Philippine fiction in English," and I hope to continue doing this, if conditions permit. So far, I've been lucky. I've found a job that is conducive to this non-profitable labor, and I live in a country where freedom of speech is, if not upheld and guarded, then tolerated for the most part, provided one sticks to creative writing and Literature, which everyone knows isn't read outside of the academe; or, if it is, isn't taken very seriously, even if it is accorded the kind of polite respect reserved for things that are vaguely exceptional but unfamiliar.

Perhaps because I have been blessed with some success, I have been content to allow things to take their course without question or comment. However, of late, I have found it increasingly difficult to maintain this blissful ignorance about the motives and effects of my writing. This is the problem that I have been trying to work through for the last few months.

As a writer whose impulse is to move people through the stories I dream up and tell, I find myself at a point of crisis, at which the dominant image is of me hurling my passion into an abyss.

Only a tiny fraction of the Philippine population wants or is able to read what I produce. If the idea, or ideal, is to move people with the printed word, which is theoretically able to reach an infinite number of readers (so long as the material it's printed on and the language it's written in persists) then I am performing way below par. I am failing. And flailing.

The world, the Philippines, has changed, and continues to change, at an ever geometrically faster rate. New questions and problems are being posed for artists and writers, and I have yet to hear them answered in concrete and convincing ways.

Today, Philippine Literature, with a capital "L," is, to me, haunted by the specter of irrelevance, and it appears that it must adapt, become not-Literature—

de-capitalize itself—or face obsolescence.

This is certainly not the first time that capitalized Literature has come under attack and scrutiny in the Philippines. The endless debate between "art for art's sake" and "committed art," ancient though it seems, is as recent as the previous century, and was put to its acid test during the Marcos era and for some years thereafter. One wonders what happened to literature, which was once as natural as breathing, and so integral to life and living, that it never occurred to anyone to require a reason for its existence and its production. I am sure that other, more qualified people can answer that question, and besides, I believe it is no longer the problem. The last ten years alone have seen unprecedented major developments in all aspects of the ways that we live.

The reality of postcolonial Philippines, as in many other postcolonial nations, is an odd limbo between what life actually is, and what it could be. Our ties to the colonizer continue to transmit images and ideals, and with them worldviews, from a way of life economically far removed from our own. While it is true that gaps also exist between rich and poor in superpowers like Great Britain and the United States of America, it cannot be denied that the gap is disproportionately wide in developing countries like ours.

Thus there is the already trite image, so beloved by photographers of Reuters and other news agencies, of people obviously living in abject poverty standing before a billboard or storefront for a luxury product. These people, focused inward on their own survival, are oblivious to the irony of the tableau and to the fact that they form part of the tableau. This divide between economic reality and aspiration has resulted in a schizophrenic society, where spaces like Greenbelt and Rockwell can coexist carelessly with railroad track communities and squatter colonies; where a Shoemart mall can become the spending focal point for laborers and farmers struggling to feed a family on a day-to-day basis.

The mass of Filipinos is poor, and yet we are all encouraged to aspire to the lifestyles of the outrageously rich. What little money is earned is often spent acquiring the trappings of a comfortable life, in forms and quantities that are within our power to acquire.

Abetting and amplifying this schizophrenia is the discourse of marketing, advertising, and public relations, which traffics in information spun at the service of profit, egging us on with the illusion that we can improve our lives and our selves by buying an object. Sachet marketing, or the selling of products in miniscule quantities, is applied to everything from conditioner to cigarettes to cell phone credits, making luxury items available to us in *tingi* proportions, with no apparent diminishing of the product's supposed benefits to our lives.

This situation is exacerbated by the ubiquity of the mass media and personal media, both of which were and continue to be conceptualized, produced, and controlled by entities that exist in economic realities far different from our own. The superpower countries have infected us with technolust and its attendant obsession with instaneity and speed—breathless, mindless speed. The messages that encourage technolust mislead us into believing that speed is applicable to and desirable for all aspects of life, and that there is a fast track to the aspirations that we claw towards.

The cycle comes full vicious circle with poverty and its legion of monsters, led by poor nutrition and education, rendering most of us unable to see beyond the next thing, the next consumable product, to get us through the day; unable to imagine alternatives for ourselves and the unique conditions in which we live. The available viable solutions are further discredited and removed from consideration when small fortunes are rewarded daily to people for being attractive, affable, or lucky, rather than intelligent, hardworking, or persevering. If suicide is a failure of the human imagination to suggest alternatives, then we are killing ourselves.

Compounded with our internalized, or sublimated, colonial mentality and the increased homogeneity of public spaces and collective experience—because how different from Robinson's Ermita can Robinson's Bacolod be?—then you get an environment in which there is no place for creators of Philippine Literature. For if the imagining of what our lives could be, what we could become, is the domain of the writer, then the writers—we—lost that territory long ago. Plato would have been proud.

Literature, once upon a time the main source of moral education, socialization, stimulation, and entertainment, has been displaced by machines that do nothing but deliver messages about how discontented we should all be, and what products we can acquire to deal with our unhappiness.

Writers in search of eternal truths must now compete with ideas that have the lifespans of butterflies, and they are losing, because the arbiters have been conditioned to have the memory capacities of goldfish. What all this has achieved is a cotton-candy culture—one that appears substantial, yet dissolves effortlessly into aftertaste when one tries to sink one's teeth into it.

As one Philippine town begins to look and behave more and more like other Philippine towns, thanks to franchises and chain stores, television networks and marketing campaigns, it only takes the shortest of steps to the point when the stultifying sameness begins to creep into our stories and novels, our poems, our plays.

This is my problem and, I believe, the problem of other writers who would

produce Literature—that the culture, the nature of the society and the world in which I exist, goes against everything that I do.

And yet I cannot lay the blame solely at the foot of a television set. Literature, and its guardians and creators—scholars, critics, teachers, and writers alike—must recognize their role in, and take responsibility for, this development.

In enfolding itself within its ideals, either of aesthetics or social realism, Literature has failed the Filipino, who chooses not to read it most of the time. Our standards of literary excellence and worth, imported from developed superpower countries, have reached a point of almost total divorce from our own history, tradition, and culture, despite their best intentions. Even Salvador Lopez's cherished exhortations on what Literature should be can be read today as treating the Filipino masses as an implied Other and casting the writer as a special individual separate from the people. Writers who joined the struggle managed to produce a lot of passionate propaganda, but very little worth reading for its own sake.

And yet, when they're not glued to a fantaserye, Filipinos do read—they read, and enjoy, tabloids, *komiks*, romance novels; or nonfiction; or works by Anglo-American and Fil-American writers. What information, reassurance, and entertainment they could not find in Philippine literature, which seems to alienate them even when it is accessible and current, they find in these other sources.

At this point, however, I must emphasize that although I am clearly appalled and alarmed at this state of our sad republic, I am aware of the folly of persisting in an attitude that could very well be my death sentence as a writer. I have looked around me, and although I do not like it, this is what I see.

I believe that this is the first step—to recognize that the Anglo-American models and ideals of literary production and evaluation cannot all work as they are in our country. They must be reassessed and revised by the coming generations of writers (paging the Writing Fellows) if they wish to continue as writers.

For instance, although English is poised to become the global language, it has become clearer and clearer to me that it will not be the dominant literary language of the Philippines. I am convinced that unless a writer grew up speaking English at home and in his daily life, he cannot and should not write in English without undergoing the torture of mastering the idioms and nuances of what has to be the most difficult language to learn, with its contradictory rules and illogical exceptions. Why bother, when there is a Philippine language that is surely more familiar, hence easier to master, and more expressive of our ideas and emotions?

Yes, there continues to be a bias for English when it comes to publication. Literature already gets precious little space in magazines and journals; what less literature in a Philippine language that large numbers of the population will not be

able to read?

Because of the Babel-like situation of language in our country, the almost fetishistic emphasis on the printed book and journal, whose publication is determined by how cheaply and easily it can be produced, distributed, marketed, and sold, will have to be reexamined as well. The postmodern age has already seen cultures blithely fragmenting themselves into structures organized into webs of nodes and clusters, and it will have to be so for literature in Philippine languages, as well as for Philippine publishing, which will have to be done on a smaller, leaner scale, perhaps through alternative channels. The chaotic Internet repels those of us who demand gatekeepers for content, but there are ways of establishing credentials and building a readership in this open medium. Self-publishing continues to be a dirty word, but it will have to be seriously explored if works in Binukid, Chavacano, or Maranao will ever be distributed to a wider audience. We will probably have to learn to trust that as literature becomes more available, accessible, and inviting, Filipinos will figure out how to interpret information for themselves, and create their own systems of value.

Translation naturally becomes a major concern when the size of the readership is considered. Future writers of Philippine literature, who already know at least two or three languages anyway, must be willing to translate their works and other writers' works into other languages, or be content to write for a limited readership.

While all this is going on, as if it weren't enough work already, thoughtful scholarship and criticism should be produced by scholars and critics grounded in local aesthetics. If the works we produce are to acquire value and earn esteem, they must be retrieved and assessed on their own terms, in the light of local tradition, without having templates and prescriptions from other cultures imposed upon them. Our exposure to and knowledge of foreign theories and standards of excellence could prove to be advantageous, helping us to locate and rationalize our own literary production in a global context.

In the light of all these requirements, it would seem better—healthier—for us to relocate to a superpower country and try our luck at establishing an identity among scores of other writers doing exactly the same thing. Perhaps.

Another option could be to embrace the cotton-candy culture and revel in it. This appears, at first glance, to be the smart choice—to write for the *now*, since one is unavoidably in the *now*. This path leads to book sales, recognition, fame, wealth, influence; the possibility of shaping society during your own time. Just hope that you're prophetic enough to keep the goldfish from turning their backs on you.

On this matter, I remain unambiguous in replying "No." I confess I still retain the cherished notion of a writer as a special individual, one with the rare gift to speak that which he sees and which others don't; but also, one who is inevitably rooted in the world in which he moves, one who is thereby burdened to show and tell that which others cannot or will not see. Writers bear witness: They testify with honesty, and they traffic in truth. They serve as our memory, conscience, teacher, and imagination. They show us what we are, what we can be and, more importantly, what we should become. They write in the now for the now, but they are also writing for the tomorrow.

Above all, they write.

At the recently concluded Iyas Creative Writing Workshop in Bacolod City, I was fortunate to have supervised two younger writers of fiction. Over the course of several small-group discussions held during the week, Ava Vivian Gonzales and Dennis Aguinaldo articulated their reasons for choosing the lonely art, the sources that fed their creative energy, and the things they considered important. Even though we discussed many problems, issues, and dilemmas facing the writers of the future, they surprised me on the last day by arriving spontaneously at the same conclusion: that they both just want to tell stories—stories that connect—and because of that desire, they are probably going to continue telling stories one way or the other.

Above all, we write. In spite of all, we write.