

THE USE OF FOLK MATERIALS IN THE WRITING OF DRAMAS*

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The use of folk materials is indispensable in the writing of literature in general and of dramas in particular. Indeed, literature cannot achieve any great mass appeal unless it makes use of materials that are rooted in the folk mind, particularly legends, myths and semi-historical events culled from the people; and literature suffers poverty of inspiration unless it springs largely from the mass-base of folk thinking and perception. We can prove this by reading different national literatures, especially the more vigorous ones, like the Greek, which has the astonishing myths that were propulsive in the writings of the three tragedians of ancient Athens and the Homeric epics. The same holds for the German, with its unusual and vigorous myths that inspired the writings of the great artists like Wagner, whose musical dramas were inspired by ancient Nordic mythologies, and a genius like Goethe, who wrote *Faust* based on the myth of the man who sold his soul to the devil. The same is also true for the Indian, with its tremendous epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and the dramas of Khalidasa, such as the *Shakuntala*, all based on timeless folk materials.

Contrast these with Philippine literature, the folk materials of which had become radically attenuated, lacking in vigor, because the legends, mythologies and semi-historical literatures had been destroyed by the fanatical Spaniards. Hence, a sensibility that is deeply rooted in the racial and national consciousness makes for great literature; whereas a heritage based only on the experiences of the recent past creates a relatively weak literature, not deeply rooted in the nourishing layers of our awareness and cultural traditions.

Our literary consciousness is shallow because of the scarcity of folk myths and hero-tales. *Lam-ang* seems to be the only true Ilokano mythology, and the *Hinilawod*, the only one that has been uncovered recently, the latter not translated into a familiar story, that may be read not only by Ilongos but by all Filipinos. And of course, the literary values of these epics are dubious, these epics chanting and moving the national psyche only peripherally, with no vital moral and artistic significance. So far, these two epics and the fragments of other ethnic works have been exclusively anthropological and do not flow into the inner sluices of our artistic literary minds. Only time will ultimately tell whether these ancient myths can contribute richly to our cultural consciousness.

Remotely, these works might interest good writers that will translate the epical materials in Pilipino or English with real artistry, so that these may challenge further exploitation by the artists and influence the creation of other works.

The case of the metrical romances brought to our shores by the Spanish colonizers and disseminated into the various regions of the country and then popularized in our *comedias* and moro-moro plays, is also instructive. Words like the *Siete Infantes de Lara*, *Rolando at Oliveros*, *Ibong Adarna*, *Jayme del Prado*, and similar concoctions of the Spanish folk imagination imported into the Philippines had a popular following in the Spanish period up to the early American regime of our history, but today, they are only being read by masteral and Ph.D. candidates. Their value as literary remains are very limited, although they inspired the *Florante at Laura* by Balagtas, also a work that appeals mostly to the literary specialists and does not move the modern popular audience, who would rather read the comics than delve into the silly and fantastic goings-on in the metrical romances.

Had Spanish rule continued into the present century, it is conceivable that these works, as moro-moro plays, would retain a local following and be of greater literary impact. But history interfered and the *comedias* and moro-moros have gone the way of all flesh, forgotten largely, remains that evoke no significant regrets among the *literati*. Who, may we ask, confess to reading avidly these metrical romances among the serious artists? One reads of a revival showing of these curious works, only these revivals last merely for two or three days, and appeal only to the very curious. Moreover, the medieval and pre-enlightenment attitudes and values of these works are a world away from the present, with its more realistic and scientific pre-suppositions. We must regretfully say that the culture that read with admiration these romantic-fantastic works is dead and that it is best to let the dead alone, lest we resurrect Zombies and Draculas in our culture.

What then?

We are left with materials of semi-historical and semi-mythological import to work on. Thus, we come to my works like *Barter in Panay* and *The Heart of Emptiness Is Black*, utilizing semi-legendary and semi-historical events and personalities to use in writing epic and dramatic literature.

I must confess I am partisan and partial to these works, being two of my major writings as epic poet and dramatist. They are ambitious attempts at finding deeply mythological under-pinnings for my creative endeavors at a time when I was still more vigorous, not only in health but also in the creative imagination than I am now. *Datu Sumakwel*, *Gurong-gurong*, and *Kapinangan* feature in both the narrative and the dramatic works. Incidentally, both works, have won important awards: *Barter* winning the first prize in the U.P. Golden Jubilee Contests for poetry, and *The Heart of Emptiness*, the Palanca Memorial first prize for the play. *Barter*, it must also be mentioned, has been printed so far in two editions, the second one being a New Day Publishers venture, which has been selling steadily well since a year ago; and I plan to initiate another edition for *The Heart of Emptiness Is Black* in the immediate future.

Barter is epic; but *The Heart of Emptiness* is tragic drama. As epic, *Barter* narrates the semi-historical, semi-legendary coming of the Bornean chiefs under Sumakwel and *Datu Puti*, to establish their 13th century colonies in Panay Island their

pact or barter with the black aborigines, under the chieftainship of Marikudo. This work is fundamentally festive in mood, though there are fatal stabbings and death, especially among the Aetas. The basic conflicts occur as formal debates, first, among the datus of Brunei, and second, among the Aetas. Therefore, the total work is socio-political in the most fundamental sense of that phrase. Freedom, equality, justice and democracy are celebrated through the epic, enunciated by the noble protagonists, like Datu Sumakwel and Paiburong, opposed by Gurong-gurong, hot-headed cousin of Sumakwel, who plans to seduce Kapinangan, Sumakwel's wife. Nick Joaquin has said of this epic that it reads like a modern novel. This is evidence of the narrative sweep and techniques made to bear in its conception and actual writing, techniques like flash-backs and stream-of-consciousness and objective correlatives.

My epic is influenced by Greek epics, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; but also by Shakespeare's dramas, especially by the use of blank verse, to express the seriousness of the entire work. Like the Greek epics, it is strongly dramatic, much of the materials being confrontations by the characters either in conversations or in serious debate. Incidentally, one of my plans is to write *Barter* into a drama, for much of the epic is already very dramatic.

I said before that most of our native folk materials, such as the metrical romances and epics like *Lam-ang* and *Hinilawod* are unrealistic and overly fantastic in their plots and their characterization. *Barter*, on the contrary, is completely realistic, making it a modern work of the imagination that can stand all possible scrutiny. Moreover, the long work is completely credible and is not, unlike Guillermo de Vega's and Hufana's epics on Marcos and Imelda, given to excessive flattery of the conjugal rulers. It is, first and last, an artistic creation, starting *in medias res* to unify the plot, with the main action limited to three days.

Now, for *The Heart of Emptiness Is Black*.

I wrote this long play as a challenge to my poetic prowess. At the time of writing, I had been re-reading a number of Greek plays, particularly *Oedipus Rex*, which impresses me as the best play by Sophocles. Having written *Barter* in Panay twenty years before, I had been planning a sequel to the epic. But the more I meditated on the project, the more I felt that writing a sequel to the epic would be *love's labor lost*. But the overriding fact influencing me to write the drama was the conviction reached after years of meditation that the materials before me could be better served if I wrote a drama, for they were compact and presented a vital conflict that could be treated in a Filipino play, namely: the conflict between individualism and collectivism, which is a present-day conflict. I also wanted to touch on the romantic conflict between illicit love and communal, especially familial, values. These two sets of conflicts are projected in the finished drama. The main conflict is exemplified by the passionate lovers, Kapinangan and Gurong-gurong, on one side, with the tribal priest, Bonggot-banwa, Datu Sumakwel, and the outraged members of the tribal community on the other. The two lovers are doomed to be discovered and punished from the beginning; but the two arouse our sympathy and pity, noble and high-minded as they, the two emotions rising to a great pitch of

passion in the play, eliciting *catharsis*. The Shakespearian element, which is in keeping with the seriousness of the action, is in the use of blank verse.

Gurong-gurong, it must be mentioned, is killed by Sumakwel, while Kapinangan is sentenced to be drowned in the open sea. Sumakwel, the irate husband and chief, also suffers greatly, for his sentence to drown Kapinangan, his beloved wife, leaves him revealed to himself as a small man and a cruel chief, a man haplessly lonely. As he himself sums it all: "The heart of human emptiness is black."

One of the sources of interest in the play is in the various levels of conflict. While the main conflict is between the lovers and the solid community, there are other conflicts that hold the readers' or the viewers' interest. Thus, there is the conflict in the mind of Gurong-gurong: whether he should remain loyal to his cousin, Datu Sumakwel, as subject and relative, against his infatuation for Kapinangan. This conflict is expressed by Gurong-gurong at the opening scene:

Must I, who am a warrior bound by oaths
To proud Sumakwel, forget fidelity?
Besides, he is my cousin, bound to me by blood,
A tie more powerful than loyalty.

...

Love is a gnawing rodent in my guts,
So I must dare to scale forbidden heights
That wall the greatest treasure of the chief.

.....

Oh, fate that brings me to this pass, I dare
To risk my life to seize the precious horde!
What if I lose the venture? Better death
Than pining for the moon beyond my reach . . .
I vanquish fear to gain great merchandise.

For another thing, there is the conflict in Kapinangan's mind, whether to surrender to the blandishments of Gurong-gurong or to remain a faithful wife, true to her marriage vows. The gradual change towards capitulation is patent in her words:

I wish Sumakwel were always by my side;
But he has work to do and I, his wife,
Share in my lord's ambitions for the tribe;
For if I fail him, then the tribe will suffer
And I shall reap the obloquy of men!
Kissed by Gurong-gurong on the mouth, she struggles and moves out of his embrace, and she says:

Oh, this is madness that will lead to death!
Do you not fear Sumakwel's lordly wrath?
Kissed once again, she says:
I am unfaithful to listen to your words!
I hang on them, as straws, for dearest life.
But you just play with my emotions. Go
And do not shadow me with your light love!

A moment later, she says:

I've felt, too, like yourself but nursed a fear
 That what I felt was infidelity
 To husband whom I have pledged to love
 Till death lowers our bodies to the grave.
 Oh, this is rashness and a certain death,
 A wave that will engulf the two of us!

Where do you lead me now? Please, let me go!

After these words, surrender is only a heart-beat away!

Finally, there is the sharp conflict in the mind of Dalogdog, the head of Sumakwel's household slaves, the one who first witnesses the illicit love between the two lovers, Gurong-gurong and Kapinangan. Dalogdog is divided between his loyalty to Datu Sumakwel and his *utang na loob* and devotion to Kapinangan. The following passage spoken by the head-slave makes this patent:

Yet, I'm beholden to his lady love,
 My mistress of whose goodness I have drunk.
 I am a fore-man by her gracious will
 And husband to my wife because of her.
 Should I betray her that she come to harm?
 Still, duty to Sumakwel is quite clear;
 And I must make report of what I've heard,
 Though hesitant to trap this amorous pair.
 Oh, I am caught between dilemma's horns.
 I like the fellow and his paramour,
 A noble woman, kind to all the slaves,
 My benefactress and a real friend!
 Ah, I shall seal my lips as if her hands
 Have placed thereon a gracious seal, that none,
 Except myself, may violate or tear . . .
 A pity truly if they come to harm.

What changed the resolve of Dalogdog to keep his mistress' secret? The reason was the critical hemorrhage of his wife, Kimay, and the words of the tribal priest that maybe Dalogdog had displeased the gods "for the merest cause." As the priest says: "search/your conscience or else her life is forfeited." The change in Dalogdog is revealed in these words:

I must, to save my wife from certain death,
 Reveal the infidelities that curse our tribe.
 Yes, yes, I have a debt of gratitude
 But I must save my wife, if not the child,
 That blob of blood that stains my Kimay's mat.
 Oh, I am ingrate to my mistress; but my wife
 Is more important than is gratitude.

Utang na loob, then, occupies an important element in *The Heart of Emptiness Is Black*, making it a true reflection of Philippine moral reality, a cause of so much

prevarication and weakness in family and national life. If one of literature's functions is to mirror and even criticize social reality, then, on that basis, this drama is a sterling addition to our significant body of literature in our country.

The Heart of Emptiness, which we have considered at some length, demonstrates, I believe, the transforming power of the imagination of the artist. The source of the plot, as you may know, is the brief treatment in the *Maragtas* of the colonization by the Bornean datus and their tribes of the island of Panay, together with the brief mention of Gurong-gurong's adultery, *Maragtas* being a prose recording of the ancient story. But in my hands, the love episode is transformed to seventy-three pages of printed matter, all in verse, with themes that have relevance to all human beings, not merely Filipinos. My decision to create the play has, I believe, been a wise one to the end that our cultural heritage has been enriched.

Consider finally the case of the *zarzuela*. Like the *comedias*, this musical drama, popular in the early American period, is now largely forgotten and totally neglected by the middle and lower classes, what with the invasion of movies from abroad and later from native sources. The *zarzuela* was a domestic drama complete with music, so that it took some bearings from opera, but almost exclusively dealing with matrimonial subject matter. Also, it was a phenomenon that had writers and musicians from the various regions of the Islands creating the texts of the plays and the music.

But it was a phenomenon that was fated to languish after two or three decades, and today, we hardly hear of even occasional revivals. Perhaps, we might say generally that most of the *zarzuelas* were sentimental, mawkishly so, and like a too tender plant could not stand the heat and tempo of modern living. The last *zarzuela* that I witnessed was in the middle twenties when I was hardly six years old. In the cities, it might have continued a little longer; but later the younger generations just ignored the musical drama. Instead, Hollywood and its silver screens invaded the Islands and in no time at all, the *zarzuela* was a dead duck!

Today, all sorts of materials, folk and non-folk, are being created. The comics avidly read by the *bakya* crowd can be potentially an outlet and a source of artistic creativity by the serious writers, though 90% of it may be just trash. The events that seize all of us so unceremoniously can and do produce fodder for creativity. The eternal conflict between good and evil, between justice and injustice, between truth and falsehood are intensely lived out in the present time. Villains and heroes, many seated in high places, are all about us, ready for exploitation by the serious writers. Myths of invincibility, themes about *tyronny* opposed by a gallant and aroused citizenry, confront our eyes almost daily. These sad, terrifying, and cruel times breed legends and myths of all sorts, awaiting the writers: the poets and the dramatists and the novelists to transform them into masterpieces. So, we cannot complain that we lack the materials, for the materials are right there before our eyes, awaiting to be seized and perhaps transformed into durable declarations and evocations of the human spirit. What is needed is only resourcefulness, guided by impeccable taste and the highest standards of creative integrity, so that our writings will be, not for just a day or a week or a month or a year, but for all time. Thank you, fellow creators of the dramatic word!

THE PEEVISH STOIC

by: *Ricaredo D. Demetillo*

*I have left behind rare views of mountains;
Also behind the wide abundant plain
Where I had gathered harvests for many seasons.
But now, with infirm feet, I have reached the main
What lies beyond? Uncertainly I peer.*

*This pier is like a broken tooth
Without a hypodermic's sharp reprieve.
The time is late and sun-motes softly die.
A boat is beached beyond the breakers' heave.
Day's fevers rise to excoriate my skin.*

*I buy a ticket for the inter-island trip.
The crowds like me await the sailing time.
No tense report forecasts a gathered storm,
But we shall cross an unfamiliar surf.
The rotted mast is hideout for the worm.*

*I brace for shocks across a race of waves.
There is a chill that settles on a cramp,
And cold is shuttered in a draught of air.
My legs now limp beneath a sputtering damp,
How will tonight, lack-luster, keep a fire?*

*There are old tales in books to comfort some,
Of havens reached and mansions in the sky.
But I no longer read their tarnished rimes;
And only hold on to my tattered coat.
I have become a stoic before I die.*

*Is it a comfort gathered near a sty?
A prodigal chewed the nuts and vegetables
Before he turned to meet his father's eye.
But God is absent in the empty sky.
I see above me ungainly shapes that fly.*

— January 10, 1982

INK SPLASHES ON THE WINGS OF NIGHT

*Ink splashes on the wings of night,
A new moon holds a lantern in the skies,
But near a curb, a canine thorough-bred
Nuzzles its nose upon a garbage pile,
Alone among a tribe of mongrels in that bed
Of rotten rinds, thick-visited by flies.*

*A bantam dog unclaimed by a kenneled house,
its white fur tarnished by the dust,
It runs the gauntlet of a hungry brood
And snarls and bites to seize its crust.
No careful water brushes its silken hide,
Or race it down a stretch of lawn with pride.*

*This is a side-street where urchins congregate
With itch or ulcer upon a leg or knee,
Half-nude or tattered as they gaze at me.
No gate opens to views of flowered greenery
But hovels where hunger tears its prey.
Dogs are not coaxed to tricks of happy play.*

*Perhaps, the dog resides with one such child,
Sharing with it the bones of poverty.
Dog is like master — bathless and hungry quite,
A repudiation of its pedigree.
Later, it will be butchered. Its lean meat
Will be a meagre feast the drunks will eat.*

— Ricaredo Demetillo

OLD HORSE

*Of late, I have not ridden my old horse.
I have him led to pasture but the grass
Is scarce and I, his master, cannot find
The sweet, abundant nourishment that he can munch
To find the strength and power to run a race
And also to compete for prizes on the tracks.*

*His racing days are over, I suppose,
The great excitements now things of the past,
When glory was a flowered wreath about his neck.
Yes, in his heyday, triumphs were thunderous claps,
The bleachers yelling to see him lead the field,
And win the jackpot for me to spend and keep.
Now, only memories are there to clasp.*

— Ricaredo Demetillo

POET'S EPITAPH

*As workers wait in twilight for the dark,
Devising with all care how to prolong
The minutes just before the night comes in,
So I await with tidy, scrupulous care
The cutting short of breath, scythed by cold Death,
Then rest at last, the harvests bundled home.*

*Long have I labored at my tasks since morning,
The pen firm at my hand, my mind alert
To savour meanings with my poet's brain.
I too have been most faithful at my tasks;
And all the minutes shared, like fish and rice,
With all who read, roused by the stirring songs.*

*So here I am, waiting for the night,
Happy that I have done my allotted share
And that my comrades think well enough of me
To honor me a place among my peers!
Are there some words to summarize my life?
My epitaph: "He pondered long and well!"*

— Ricaredo Demetillo