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Towards A Re-orientation of Literary Studies

ROLANDO S. TINIO

In his essays on Literature which have been anthologized in *The Idea of a University*, Cardinal Newman draws the distinction between Science and Literature as follows: Science deals with objective truth or "things," Literature deals with subjective truth or "thoughts;" Science treats of the universal and eternal, Literature treats of the personal and historical; Science uses words as symbols, Literature uses language in its full compass. In addition, Newman points out that Literature is a "national and historical fact" shaped inevitably by the history of a people. Hence, authors perform two functions: (1) to "fix" the national character; (2) to create the national language.

From Newman's concepts, it is possible to derive the following statements about the nature and function of literary studies in a university: (1) Literary studies inquire ultimately into the history of ideas of a people; (2) Literary studies require a framework which is essentially historicist rather than formalistic; (3) Literary studies must draw extensively from extra-literary disciplines; (4) Literary studies can provide useful data for other humanistic studies.

Moreover, the relationship between the study of literature and the study of language becomes clear. Literary works of the past reveal how language has been used with optimum effect in the light of the realities which circumscribed the user in a given period of national history. Much of this usage survives, presumably, in the present "conversation and composition" of the educated classes, and becomes the springboard for future usage insofar as it accommodates changes in the realities that seek literary expression. The new language is distilled through the

new literature. While the university may not necessarily produce the men of genius who will create the literature of the future, even as it probably never had a hand in the production of the geniuses of the past, still, it performs the valuable service of training students to read period literature with historicist sensitivity and to anticipate future literature with critical enthusiasm. Thus, normally, the university produces the professional scholar and critic of period literature, and/or the professional reviewer and editor of contemporary literature, and/or the teacher of both literatures. Because of the essential connection between language and literature, teachers of literature become also the unofficial guardians of language. Through classes in writing, they influence the shape of that language, trying very hard to purify it of the "gibberish of the people." The linguist, after all, merely analyzes the language as it has taken shape.

In the PHILIPPINES, however, the character of literary studies has been determined by the colonial origins of the prevailing educational system. Renato Constantino in *The Miseducation of the Filipino* and Prof. Lucila V. Hosillos in *Philippine-American Literary Relations (1898-1941)* both emphasize the fact that examples of American literature became compulsory reading for the early colonials for strictly political reasons. This expediency created the need for the extensive teaching of the English language. Hence, Departments of English have become an institution in Philippine colleges and universities, with the primary obligation of propagating English language proficiency. The government requires of all college students eighteen (18) units of *English*, not of *Literature*. Thus, Philippine colleges and universities do not have Departments of Literature. Instead, Departments of English have developed into Departments of English (the language) and English Literature, or of English and English-and-American Literature. Others have evolved, in spirit at least, into Departments of English and Comparative Literature. Philippine literature in English is studied under these departments; Philippine literature in Spanish is studied under a Department of Spanish if it is studied at all; Philippine literature in Pilipino and/or the other Philippine

languages is studied in Departments of Pilipino, Philippine Studies, or whatever *curiosa* may be organized which would fit ostensibly the accustomed format of a university.

The general disorientation of literary studies in the Philippines may be traceable to at least two basic assumptions: (1) Literary studies are naturally done in and through English; (2) Literary studies are essentially studies of foreign literature, especially Anglo-American literature.

Because, historically, Filipinos go to American universities for masteral and doctoral studies in literature, the first set of basic assumptions have automatically led to a second set: (1) The model for literary studies is that which is represented by the literature programs in American universities; (2) The criteria for critical as well as creative exercises are those which govern American letters; (3) The pinnacle of academic achievement consists in being accepted into the teaching faculty of an American university, and/or in American scholarly journals, and/or by American presses.

The corollaries are inevitable: (1) Literature programs in Filipino universities are a make-shift provision for those students prevented by circumstances from pursuing further studies abroad; (2) The products of American literature graduate programs are superior to products of Philippine literature graduate programs; (3) Literature textbooks produced by American authors are superior to literature textbooks produced by Filipino authors.

As a result of the general disorientation of literary studies in Philippine universities, the following may be noted: (1) Literary studies have remained alienated from other studies which bear directly on the national life; (2) Literary studies have done little to stimulate contemporary Filipino literary genius; (3) Literary studies have failed to create a living community of non-student readers; (4) Literary studies have produced no serious impact on the national consciousness.

It is true that serious studies on Philippine, especially vernacular literature, have begun to appear during the past two decades. However, the situation is paradoxical. Authors without previous training in American universities betray a significant

deficiency in scholarly skills or a significant lack of critical sophistication. On the other hand, those who have had previous training in American universities are handicapped by a scholarly and, especially, critical apparatus which is at odds with the national literary situation and incongruous with the essential character of the national literature.

What seems to be needed is a total re-thinking of the philosophy of literary education in Philippine universities, and a total reorganization of the literature curriculum. A few tentative suggestions are proposed in this paper:

(1) The tradition of Philippine literature must be seen as vernacular, with writings in Spanish and English by Filipinos as minor phases within the historical continuum. Grave misunderstandings have arisen from the accustomed categorization of Philippine literature into Spanish, English and the Philippine languages. Thus, it is not usually appreciated that a common literary sensibility unifies these literatures. In fact, it is usually assumed that the Filipino literary sensibility has reached its fullest realization with the Filipino authors in English. It is further assumed that this realization is illustrated by works which are at furthest remove from the spirit and form of vernacular literature. Bad Philippine literature in English is literature which has not escaped the tendencies of, say, Tagalog literature. A more perspicacious overview of Philippine literary history might reveal that it is precisely the accepted masterpieces of Philippine writing in English which are least significant in terms of the national literature.

(2) A critical apparatus and canon must be developed out of the vernacular tradition. Since the latter has been shaped by European, especially Spanish, rather than Anglo-American models, literature programs need to incorporate studies in European, especially Spanish, literature rather than studies in English and American literatures. To distill the essential national character of the vernacular sensibility, and to be able to differentiate it from the foreign sensibility which has influenced it heavily, it is useful to contrast the original foreign model with the Filipino variant. However, it is important to remember that

the variation indicates, not the failure of the Filipino sensibility to assimilate completely the foreign form, but rather the restructuring of that form because of the basic characteristics of the national sensibility and of the national language into which the form has been absorbed.

(3) At the moment, it is difficult to characterize the national literary sensibility because the great bulk of vernacular literature has remained uncollected. Hence, it seems imperative that massive basic research in vernacular literature be undertaken. Beyond that, editors and publishers must be willing to make these works available in bulk. Eventually, they should dominate general textbooks on literature and make a considerable impact on the general literary consciousness of the layman.

(4) Because of the sensitive relationship between literature, the literary consciousness and language, it goes without saying that all literary exercise must be in the national language. As a matter of fact, it is suggested here that a foreign influence can successfully modify the vernacular sensibility only when that influence enters it through the vernacular language. It is also suggested that what does get absorbed by the indigenous sensibility is absorbed only because the indigeneous sensibility already has the *potential* for it. Where this potential is not found in that sensibility, the foreign idea is eventually flushed out, although it may capture the imagination of a coterie for a limited period of time. What is completely alien and alienating cannot even be translated into the language of the people, and therefore does not even "appear," so to speak.

(5) The relationship between literary studies and the development of the national language is, of course, a symbiotic one. Literary studies in Pilipino can go only as far as the development of the Pilipino language will allow. But, conversely, the development of the Pilipino language will go only as far as the literary exercises that are done in it.