

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Writer and His Society

Gemino H. Abad

Philippine Studies vol. 36, no. 2 (1988) 185–190

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

The Writer and His Society

G E M I N O H . A B A D

Any state today and every "revolutionary" movement claims the name of democracy to veil their subjection of the individual—the individual as the mute subject in all their speeches. In every republic, everybody loves from habit to speak on behalf of everybody else; consensus is the driving motive and the driven end. Anyone who would have power always speaks for "the people"; speech, like government, derives its power from those whom it represents. Spoken for, represented, but who? Everyone of course, the people: the great myth which engenders society, the same myth which society propagates. Who then is not spoken for, not represented? But no one of course, the individual. For it is unthinkable that the individual could be the people. How could the individual? He is no one, representing no class nor party, no church nor army; he is a rebel in fact, an outlaw in fiction, society's unnamed outcast. How could the individual speak his own voice with the same words that merely fall from the speaking power? No one in his right mind dares speak for himself. Who does he think he is apart from everyone; what is the secret wellspring of his own thinking? And so it happens naturally that the writer must speak for others; it is the great and common expectation. Otherwise, why read him at all if he speaks for no one; whom does he address, who will understand? But the writer is no one; it is his fate and a public scandal. He does not speak for himself. He cannot, because he ever knows less about himself, on the verge of madness, and has a sense of descent at every self's dawning. Nor does he speak for others. He cannot, because he has an instinctive dread of that primal democratic theft, that suave speaking of power.

Since he is no one, he speaks for no one, and is read by no one. But no one, as no one knows, is everyone who has ever felt the duplicity of representation which secretes the being already spoken for.

To speak for, to represent—here is power, and its dynamo is language. We may remain unaware of any living and critical relationship between the writer and his society unless we see first that the power that unscrolls from language is double-edged. Both everyman and his society, that historical accident of his birth, are interpolated in their language, inserted between and amongst its words; language itself, if their common accident of bondage, is also their common fate. Both individual and society are already spoken for. It does not particularly matter whether there are more than one dominant languages in daily usage; the daily uses of one or more, often in fact intussuscepted, are the articles of the faith, the joints and musculature of that social formation we call the community. The meanings that our daily words establish in converse, commerce, and communion with one another—these form every individual from within according to the image that his society has of itself, the same image that society has received from the daily uses of its language by its individual subjects. Is it possible to interrogate—from what standpoint?—this free circulation of *in-forma-tion* and mass communication? Society continues to propagate itself through its subjects.

The writer at least is aware of this dialectic between self and society in and through the language of daily use. Watch consciously, closely, this language—English, Tagalog, Cebuano, Spanish; do not their words work our minds, as the farmer works the soil, and so compose our nativity? Our language is all that we have—apart from the oracles of nature which humble our towering words, and athwart those silences where other thoughts and feelings shun our words. And being all that we have, it possesses us most, for always, secretly, we move and have our being there. As we use it, it uses us for all the uses and ends of community; it *speaks us*, indeed, *beforehand*, because its meanings had already been agreed upon long before us; it is almost as though, whatsoever those meanings, they had only found us a voice that we took as ours. But if it speaks us, then too in and by it, we could speak back if we would. If in that labyrinth of other voices, ancestral or borrowed, we should find our own! But

precisely, finding the language of his blood is the writer's job of work. For there, in that secret realm of our inner speaking, we create those myths by which we live, as it were without sponsor—those illusions or faiths to comfort our essential solitudes or immortalize our forlorn acts of dying; there too, only there, we reform our habits of feeling; we revise our modes of perception. *But only if we would speak back.*

So then, blood will flow, and feces will out. The body politic is body indeed. Its language is feces and blood. Take now a last look at that body politic which to abandon is to crawl away on all fours without footing, under the illusory shelter of an empty shell echoing a lost sea. That body in fact sanctioned our birth and *organized* our instincts and individual moves, through our history, from the time we first *imagined* we were one people and blessed ourselves with a proud name and identity—Filipinos. That act of the imagination called into being and visibility its own body— one nation, one people; that single continuing act is the myth of the Filipino which, like all myths, resists the fixity of every nomenclature and ideology. But did I say, *history*? History is ideological, and demythologizes for the ends of power; rather call it life, individual actions that like waves compose the calms and storms of a great sea (that had first gathered them as its flock), and together worship by breaking upon a common shore ever broken and ever found. Mystical? Oh yes, for life is, its imagination and all its myths, while history isn't and so breeds ideologies of power as the enthralling, ready-made, and fixed substitutes. Yet there was never any history but a myth more powerful than the variant readings of history and the voluble readings of power by which the myth is ever broken, ever found. It is not possible to fix the time and place of that singular and everliving act of the imagination by which individuals hallow the ground of their nativity and create their immortal mythology; not ever possible, because it takes place once upon every time and in every place where the same imagination takes root and wing. But that it is not possible is precisely what makes the act and its mythology all the more real because both act and myth encompass all the truth and the dignity of all history that passes from every individual action.

The writer is the authentic and the mythical figure of the Individual. He is the individual in the mass by which the mass achieves the

name and place of its nativity. He is anti-ideological rather than anti-political. No one is more fiercely political than the opponent, the displacer of all forms of subjection. He loves solitude for love of the multitude; he is the multitude in every individual solitude. The name and place of the writer's nativity is the imagination by which in the beginning both language and society had been constructed, but which society and its daily uses of language had soon thereafter subverted for the ends of power over the individual. The time and place of that imagination is the basic humanity and mysterious dignity of every individual human being which history, in the service of ideology, has ravaged with the cheapest of intellectual commodities—the insights of opinion, the ways of looking toward power and hegemony. But there only—in that time and place of the imagination, in that individual solitude where everyman's humanity and dignity are the mystical ground—there, the truth is not any word but its love and service; there, justice is not any law or constitution, but what every law must love and serve.

Society needs the writer like it needs the imaginary bullet through its imagined head so its blood will flow, its feces will out. Is he not dangerous? No society is safe in fact without him. He alone stands against society and its daily uses of language, which are the uses of power. Our time and space, where we live out directed lives, is over and above all else ideological. Every individual is the bone of contention, and his society the time and space where his bones are picked to flesh him anew. In that contest for his self to serve the body politic, in the sound and fury of rival ideologies, the most powerful instrument for his conversion is his own language in the comfortable guise of daily usage. For language secretes a way of seeing and feeling about things which becomes "our world"; it builds a habit of feeling, a nerve of perception, which is the society's ideology by which its subjects are internally formed to serve its ends and thereby survive its own lack and contradictions. Society protects its own. It knows its sheep, and the sheep corral happily there. We should in fact revere this State as a boon which at birth we hardly deserved, for the individual in fact may be the unwanted wolf. Besides, what society is without its inherent contradictions; the imperfect, says one poet, is our paradise. But how does it come about that those gaps and contradictions are often missed? For surely it isn't as though

we had been unwilling to lose the bliss of ignorance. The fact is, we see only what our words permit us to see. When we understand something, we understand the very word for it—a word which makes us see it by its wordy light, but also prevents us from seeing anything more. Since we can think no farther than the word (so it seems), we readily assume the truth that the word confers. Yet, when we understand something, we only really stand under it; it casts a shade, and there we rest content. How easily thus is one inscribed or spoken for in the daily uses of language that construct the unexamined mythology of one's society, its omnivorous ideology (its way of looking) by which we communicate and so live. There, in fact, we achieve our subjectivity. We are the fundamental subject of our language, for we are subject to it. Our sense of self or identity consists of the words that we give ourselves.

This is why the writer is fundamentally anti-ideological, against the very grain of thought and feeling (which had only been ingrained). While society's ideology sustains him, he needs to see beneath and around its words that speak him by day without sense of the surrounding dark. He is the best equipped because he sees from within language where no sun is, and there makes a new clearing that we sometimes recognize as a new text of reality. He is sensitive to rifts and fissures that cleave those varying uses of language where the individual is a subject divided and apportioned—the legal self in the discourse of the courts, the 'political animal' in the language of politics, the moral self in the ethical solution of words, the giddy self of feeling which lacks for words, the ghosts that call out from other wordy voids. In those communicable uses of the self by language, by which his society endows the self with governable identities, the unknown self encounters its subjectivities and, with wordless eyes, breaks the ground of its native language; and yet the crisis there provoked has always been an imminent site of breakup and time of judgment for self and society. Thus, there is no end to transformation, but the dogmas of ideological discourse would bully the individual self to "correct thinking" and the party line, the deodorized feces of answers which have lost their questions.

Every writer has a different sense of language by which he cancels his *sub-scription* to whatever ideology, his simply being written under it, and clears a site between and amongst the words where he speaks

his own voice. It happens always, when he has found his voice and invented his speech, that it is the singular and haunting voice of everyman's basic humanity and dignity over which no language holds sway. For the words are no longer words but acts of the writer's sense of his humanity and dignity as fellow-being to all men and women. We simply cannot begin to see things anew and break old chains of feeling within the writer's own special clearing unless we first realize that his language never existed before it was writ. His language is an artifice of the imagination, a language found and invented in those spaces within the language that we thought we knew, but where our eyes had grown blind, our hearts cold, and our tongues glib and picayune. The writer's language is a language that has breached the wall of daily usage and information, and so let flow the blood over words that tyrannized with their clarity, and let out the feces from words that perverted the intimacy of communion into the gobbledygook of mass communication and propaganda; in short, a language freed from its ideological moorings in the daily uses of society's own speaking where the individual is recognized only as the subject of various sentences to death, imprisonment, fanaticism, derangement, and other bizarre subjectivities.

I have of course created a special meaning for *writer*—in fact, a mythology. But since he more than any other creates our myths over and against the ideological secretions of language as society's great unconscious monologue, he may deserve an impending crag over and against the world's vast ideological pantheon. The world feeds on his liver.