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Literature as History

CIRILO F. BAUTISTA

Literature is always history, and history—the events captured and pinned to a textuality—is not always literature. The best histories have been written by literary men, from Machiavelli, Rabelais, Boswell and Young, to Churchill, Rizal, and Agoncillo. It is an axiom, both on the aesthetic and practical planes, that the creative writer has necessarily a profound sense of history, since he deals with phenomenological and sociological materials, shaping them into linguistic formalities variously called poetry, fiction, and drama. Literary realities are inextricably linked with historical realities so that consciously or unconsciously, the writer transforms history in his given literary mode and history, in turn, transforms his artistic perspectives. The historical coda, to be meaningful and appreciated as an individual utterance with national signification, must include not only the interplay of human ideas and human affairs, but also the harmonium of text, aesthetics, and grammar. The literary historian, in effect, reverses the machinery to codify the historical coda within the literary framework. In that new coda, the restriction of events is loosened to accommodate intellectual and material exigencies apart from those that determined such events; there, taboos are deconstructed to expose their implication for and ramification into human progress; there the historian puts on the clothes of the artist to delineate flourishes that will animate and clarify the text.

Using this framework as a model, much of Philippine literature in the most recent times can be perceived as actually illuminated history. With imagination and a displeased social conscience, the poets, novelists, and dramatists recorded and decoded historical events and situated them in the locus of the nation's Imagination which is the un-

acknowledged final arbiter in any complexus of crises. The writer's imagination, needless to say, is the key agent here, for it transmogrifies human conditions into meaningful human experiences for the delectation of both historian and belletrist. It rectifies and amends textual and historical incongruities without cancelling the foundation of truth in human experiences. The creative writer is both a recorder and an inventor of history. When he achieves the apex of his art, he becomes history.

We were witness once again to the role of the writer as historian in connection with the vote on the proposed constitution. We saw the attempt of politics to usurp this role, in the mistaken notion that the deconstruction of political texts is a prerogative of the politician. This is an old notion, dating back all the way to Legaspi of the Spanish rule, and nurtured by the bureaucratic aspirations of bureaucratic supernumeraries. Politicians write the worst histories, but politicians do not know this. They confuse numerical superiority with historical fidelity. If politics, as declared by the late "Amang" Rodriguez, is addition, then the Filipino politician is an arithmetician of the first magnitude. He is neither befuddled nor overwhelmed by the turn of events, no matter how serious, and does not easily surrender a political ambition or give up a struggle. By lineage, he is not so much an offspring of Plato or Aristotle as of Machiavelli, though along the way, on the tortuous road to the ideal of selfhood, he acquired a Catholic impertinacity that tempers his propensity for double-talk and personal aggrandizement. Politics is the first recourse of the weak and the last recourse of the strong. This is why a lot of pretense occurs in the political arena, very often distorting the truth in the process.

But the writer-historian is never a politician, though he is immersed in the waters of politics. Therein lies both his greatness and his downfall. If he cannot resist the blandishment of phenomenological materialism which transforms errors and defects into illusions of perfection, he will write a faithless history; if he maintains an equilibrium between national perception and national development, he will write a beautiful history. It will be truthful. We can cite the 1986 February Revolution as an example of a phenomenon transcribed into real history by the creativity of the writers. Long before it occurred, it had already happened in their poems, stories, and dramas. The actual downfall of the regime then in power merely needed the confirming

voice of the people in the formality of an informal revolution at EDSA. That is why no blood was spilled, for the tanks, guns and cannons sent to repel the revolution were helpless against the literary ammunition that confronted them—poems, maxims, chants, songs and exhortations on T-shirts, banners, stickers, and handbills. How could they be destroyed? The triumph of people power was really a triumph of literature. At the same time, if we apply the method of literary deconstruction on the aforementioned works, we will discover the mysterious power of prognostication its authors possessed, by which they were able to prescribe sanctions and forebodings to alleviate or cure the national ills. The writer's imagination empowers him to magnify events that are only forthcoming, to situate them in the center of national dreams and policies, and to predict the consequential problems and prospects. His vision is his only strength, and his imagination nourishes that vision.

Let me cite an example from my own experience. I was going over the draft of the third volume of my epic *Trilogy of Saint Lazarus* when I came across a section describing the exile of President Marcos. Note that I finished this section long before his downfall, so I was surprised at discovering that I had anticipated not only the February Revolution but also the Marcosian flight as well. The only detail at variance with actual events is the place of exile, which in my poem is Italy. In this section, the exile is speaking to himself as he cogitates on his misfortune:

He sat in a hotel in Sorento, there
 where love songs closed the final memory of
 pain, and talked to himself as he had talked to
 himself in Capri and Amalfi, walking
 on the shore and throwing his heart to the gulls

of the Middle Sea. Himself he accused now,
 or what remained of himself now, for his soul
 broke in Amsterdam amongst the blue tulips,
 when the word needed him no more. O, he was
 dead, then, the most dark perishing in the book,

bound and bonded like a bride but rejected,
caught on the move. The word flew through his window
and declared: "Sir, I am through with poetry.
Stick and stone can build a better world or a
donkey's bray a better Jerusalem. O

"it fooled me! For thirty years I did not catch
the trick, thought it was magic when all the time
the hat was fake and the rabbit a splinter
in my eye. Why do I have to know it here,
in this bright silence, with the pall of Brussels

"and Amsterdam in my brain, and the ladies
laughing in the sun? Must all ignorance pass
to cleave my letters? Having nothing I, yes,
I wanted all—money that staggers and name
that stabs—weaving, like bats, pieces of darkness

"together. Had I been forewarned against it,
the shine of it, the backlash, I would have crawled
under rocks and vanished, but I flew after
money and name, very like a flame, and burned
my tail in the turning—all these for nothing—

"all these and the warlock signs I shaped to trap
the wealth or cast the hunger out of your door
return ungilded, they work no more. They walk
on dry leaves in my mind, their feet shod in steel,
and I bleed. Where is the mystery? Where is

"the magic?" He wept. Rizal before him wept,
and Mabini also, but his tears were far
deeper than the space between the stars, nor would
history save him or all the fools who hanged
by their fingers to be remembered by it,

nor coming children sing of him, nor banknotes
bloom with his face. For this was the deepest death,
to be disowned by words, and therefore, to be
silent amongst the living realities
of being. Terror unspoken hid behind

doors that smiled but never spoke, guns that winked but
never spoke, mouth forever closed. All the bread
of Italy could not cover his hunger
though they be stacked like ladders against olive
trees. He watched the sea in Sorrento unfold

the silence in his heart on the blue waves: piece
by piece the water tore his dreams, tossed them to
the deep, scattered them to the air like many
butterflies. His silence killed him, for the words
would not speak. In this way he rehearsed his own

funeral, there in the room, from the moment
they cut out his internals and soaked his flesh
in lime, to the tortured tears in the graveyard.
Strange, but he was not doomed, only subverted
by what he once governed, there in the room, there

in the grave, there in the water, his voice locked
in his thought a failed philosophy unwrit
in any book. Could he not raise himself, then,
like a magician, and trick the silence to
release his voice? Trick the earth to spring his bones

so that all his unspoken verbs would tear down
the walls, trample on the sad flowers, and calm
the waves leaping the air? Tricks, tricks, all life
was a trick. The rocks of Capri were merely
sunspots in the eye; the blue sea or the birds

in the bush were merely particles of light
scraping the skull. To propose the ultimate
feat—sawing the word in half without bleeding—
is to perform a fracas, but it could be
done, yes, as easily as he could commit

the mistake of living in a dead world, yes,
with a flick of the wrist, the imagined saw
moving against the meaning's edge so that when
suddenly halted, two wings would flutter from
the teeth to settle on, and to unsettle,

the brain. A most easy matter, even in
solemn days when the wind ruled over habits
of sex and food, this, to subvert subversion—
trapping the magician, as it were, by his
own trick, being ahead of him in his own

illusion and pulling, ha, ha, ha, the hat
out of the rabbit! Because to be forewarned
about death was to avoid death, as to say
any of these was the same as saying all
of these: "Birds flew from his mouth," His mouth constructs

the shape of birds," His mouth is birds flapping wings
against his teeth." He could say that of Holland,
Manila, or Indonesia, and ships
would still dock at Napoli. Tricks. Even death
was a trick, if one had fast eyes. So he sat

in a hotel room in Sorrento, shuffling
a deck of playing cards while his dead body
was being buried near the sea. Softly, he
sang his own dirge as he threw the cards one by
one out of the window. Tears climbed up the stairs.

To cite another example. Recently, a news item affirmed the belated transmogrification of a literary death into a historical laudation. The Sangguniang Panglunsod of Cabanatuan approved unanimously Resolution Number 124 renaming the city's Cabanatuan West Central School Paaralang Elementaryang Lazaro Francisco. The bill, sponsored by Primo E. Ferrer, officially honored, at appropriate rites, the novelist-nationalist. We thus see that for literature to pass into history, what is required is not only the happy conjunction of time and propriety but also the amendment of lingering false ideas. It is a subversion of false history to break it down and sift its elements to discover its saving justification. Rizal did this in his own time with his novels and annotations of Spanish-instigated historical documents. His triumphant reconstructions, summarized by his poem, "Mi Ultimo Adios," apotheosized his stature in the progressive journey of the Filipino soul. Rizal achieved what no other writer has achieved—the personification of history through literary craftsmanship. He became both a religion

and a history. It seems as if he had mastered a dingy sort of occultism by which he not only named nameless things and events but also computed their meanings. With his transcriptions, historical arbitrariness and accidentality stopped and literature marched forward arm in arm with reality. His last farewell was in fact a valedictory address to the divinities of reason and imagination.

In this connection, the old maxim, "History repeats itself," is a misstatement. It is men who repeat themselves when their elaborate hullabaloo and constant pomposity lead them to the cul-de-sac of triviality and narrow-mindedness. The textuality of their eventual entrapment does not repeat itself; it merely forces the reader to regret the fallibility and helplessness of men. No hermeneutics can save them in such a predicament; no amount of forewarning can prevent other men from getting into the same predicament. It is literature, on closer examination, that certainly repeats itself. Being concerned with men in their business of surviving, literature converts their material struggles into spiritual finalities without losing grasp of their essential frailties. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. In the factory of the imagination, the process of historical illumination resolves the doubts and misgivings of the nation, with the writer extending life to a meaningful stretch with the help of his artistic ammunition. It fills up the lacuna produced by misdirected human passion and misplaced governmental actuation. "Even death is useful to a writer," Andrei Sinyavsky wrote, because it clarifies the vague corners of human existence. Art is longer than life only because the artist has many lives, more than a cat's and he has the uncanny ability to resurrect himself in the lives of other artists. This may be called aesthetics or necromancy. It does not matter. The important thing is that it defines the boundary between reality and reality, and creates a resolution of human dilemmas on the literary plane which is the source of all realities. The spaces around a printed poem or around a printed story are an expostulation on a human absence that should not be ignored. These spaces should be read as parts of the text, and not as interruptions of the text. At the very least, they are an interpellation of the text whose interpretation is a prerogative of the literary artist. Ordinary history is a text of semblances and surfaces. When written by the imaginative writer, it becomes a history of the imagination and of the soul, because now everything, including the spaces and the margins, are taken into

account in the literary reckoning. It is now a finished history because it is now a literature begun.

To summarize, literature is always history because first, it is the only valid history as a result of the writer's creative energy located in a phenomenological milieu, and, second, it is the product of the writer's skill at anticipating future events. In fine, the history of literature is the literature of history.