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LEONARD CASPER

In response to a questionnaire which anticipated adherence to collectivist programs of action, Katherine Anne Porter once wrote: "I have never known an uninteresting human being, and I have never known two alike. . . . I am interested in the thumbprint. I am passionately involved with these individuals who populate all these enormous migrations, calamities; who fight wars and furnish life for the future; these beings without which, one by one, all the 'broad movements of history' could never take place."¹

Recently William Kennedy, author of novels about marginal men during the Depression, repeated this warning against "the self-destructive element," identified by him as "the appeal of propaganda or partisan writing." The true literary imagination, he argued, "does not reach for, nor does it arrive at, simple conclusions. It is more concerned with centering on the action of things, the fluid condition of things, the wholeness of things, the open-endedness of things, than it is with formulating prescriptions for proper revolutionary or reactionary behavior."² He went on to paraphrase a point made by Albert Camus, a writer equally alert to sociopsychological and political-moral complexities in the human condition: "if the merit of a piece of writing is imposed either by law, or by professional obligation, or by terror, then where is the merit?"

Such comments declare the ambiguity of life unambiguously. Forthrightness, after all, is to be expected in expository essays whose first

1. Katherine Anne Porter, *The Days Before* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 128.

2. William Kennedy, "Be Reasonable—Unless You're a Writer," *New York Times Book Review*, 25 January 1987, p. 3.

purpose is to convince through clarity or to persuade through the power of facts logically aligned. But Porter, Kennedy, and Camus, along with hundreds of similar world-class writers, as they approach the mystery of being (and of becoming, and of having been) through fiction, find it necessary to be more investigative than declamatory, much more humble, in presenting a facsimile of a *whole* person. Fiction at its best is argument- by-indirection, faithful foremost to experience, the passing processes that engage humankind in mutual osmosis. There can be no "literature to specification," that is, to preconceived ideology. The function of fiction is not to illustrate abstractions but to test them, out of high regard for that essential human element, the *eventfulness* of events. In an open society, composed of open minds, the writer does not anticipate a captive audience nor depend on captive characters.³

But, Filipino nationalists may irritably object, these considerations represent at best Euro-American accumulated wisdom, or at worst, evolution of rationalized strategies for evasiveness. Who can say that they apply *here* and *now*, in a non-Western society with an "unfinished revolution" uppermost on its agenda?

It is true that Euro-American societies (despite a resurgence in ethnic pride within Western cultures) tend to be oriented more towards individualism than towards extended families and to be definable as developed rather than labor-intensive, developing nations. It is equally true that literature in the Philippines has a lengthy history of didacticism, descending from colonial powers, and of polemicism, rising from protestors against those powers. Nor is there any doubt that continuing American military presences and escalating multinational corporate interests *can* be decried as alien to Philippine self-definition and -determination, and that therefore, literary theory might conceal indifference to these dangers behind a summons to freedom.

Even granting all these differences and potential dangers, what remains to be examined are the *implications* of any dissimilarities in cultural outlook. Is the "unfinished revolution" directed against external forces only? Would Philippine life not improve with diminished control by socioeconomic elites, and of patron-client

3. For elaboration of this philosophy of composition, see the author's *Firewalkers: Literary Concelebrations, 1964-1984* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987); or Linda Ty-Casper, "Literature: A Flesh Made of Fugitive Suns," *Philippine Studies* 28 (1980):59-73.

bondage? Do Filipinos dare to dream the democratic ideal; dare to adapt freedom and equality to a culture where personality cults remain so prominent, despite lip-service to "people power"; dare to strive for economic independence, while avoiding isolationism? If these and other changes can be conceived of as possible benefits, and freedom as a basic human right rather than as a Western import, should not the conventional Filipino view of literature as didactic document (when-ever it is perishable entertainment) be subject to reconsideration as well?

Viewing literature as a teaching instrument need not be wrong, provided that teaching (a participatory, open study of a subject's significance) not be confused with indoctrination (dogmatic imposition of an orthodoxy).⁴ Similarly, the role of the serious writer in society can be better anticipated and evaluated if society is thought of as the actual persons whose lives intersect but remain differentiated within given geographic and historical boundaries, rather than as demographic dots on a map of gross statistics on a graph or as "the masses" to be manipulated by this employer class or that rightist or radical political group. People *are* citizens, union members, neighbors, employees, church-goers, members of a family, and the like. But if that is all they are, and if their daily lives are drained by these institutions rather than the group-units helping them towards survival and perfection, to that extent the lives are unformed or *deformed*. Society is depreciated when it means organization of a population into *sip-sips* of whatever power brokers currently assume leadership. Society is people, and people are persons, and any governance, any sociopolitical constraint, that refuses to recognize that fact will become abusive. The same is true for the writer who has no respect for his/her characters.⁵

Journalists have this obligation of respect, because they deal with actual, not composite persons. The price of freedom, therefore, of a free press and ordinary reportage, is thoughtfulness, honesty, accuracy. It is revealing, however, that more sophisticated journalism-in-depth, found primarily in feature articles, approximates the intimacy made

4. See for example, the author's "The Critical Mass in E. San Juan," *Solidarity* 102 (1985): 132-38.

5. Compare the characters in Santos' long and short fiction, in the author's "Paperboat Novels: The Later Bienvenido Santos," *Solidarity* 104/5: 148-52.

accessible in fiction by depending more on narrative re-creation than on pure exposition. It could be the influence of New Journalism from abroad or of persons such as Nick Joaquin, skilled in all genres, but where newspaper leads used to provide elementary who-what-where-when-and-how information, they now are more likely to focus immediately on a person in trenchant action, just as fiction does.

Without subverting the recorded and uncontested facts of history, past or present, the writer of fiction uses these same narrative techniques enhanced by imaginative insight, to portray the Philippine experience. "Truth in Fiction and History" was the subject of a roundtable discussion by several Filipinos (N.V.M. Gonzalez, Bienvenido N. Santos, Linda Ty-Casper, David Quemada, Elmer Ordonez, and Jaime An Lim) in Ann Arbor, 2 August 1985. Their consensus was that formal history naturally tends to limit its concern to prominent figures and to generalized forces, while fiction, when it succeeds, offers a wide, deep range, individualizing those forces. So history and fiction are complementary. Furthermore, they agreed that what distinguished propaganda from serious fiction is not the degree of commitment to enlightened values but "the art of the particular and of surprise." The propagandist usually considers his values so preeminent and self-evident that he promotes them through a stammer of vacuous cliches, while the writer of serious fiction, required to find evidence of worth in the flesh, the fullness of dimensioning, must let characters bear witness in their own honest and exacting way, not by fanfares of oratory (author intrusion) or assumption of brassy charismatic leadership (the protagonist as author's advocate).⁶

Exactly twenty years earlier, historian Horacio de la Costa argued much the same point: "The facts, the bare bones of our history, these we may safely trust our historians to collect; but only our writers can bring them to life again." What he added is that Filipinos "must steel ourselves against the shock of finding somewhere in this vast area an Asian nation of Malay stock, socially structured on a basically Indonesian pattern, containing a large infusion of Chinese blood and attitudes, but with a cultural heritage in part Spanish, in part Anglo-Saxon. That nation will be ourselves."

The corollary to these observations on Philippine diversity is that whatever selectivity is required, because not everything can be shown or tested at once, these qualifications must be acknowledged, and each voice and version be recognized as part of a difficult, ongoing dialogue. The chronicling of society, like society itself, is open to every man, in anyman's choice of languages. Exclusion by censorship or proscription by small-minded Uncritics or obsessed commissars of culture threaten real democracy. So does *any* attempt to dictate taste or monitor directions.

A writer's deepest personal interests, whatever stirs his or her passions towards explorations beyond successful refusal or transgression, normally will turn that writer to one set of moving images and observations rather than another. Not party membership, not contest rules, not editorial policy, not even fame can do as much, for these tend to invite conformity, complacency within narrow excitements. Still, as every experienced writer also knows, the ultimate decisions—the sensibility of a character, the very voice of story—in any work of integrity will be made by the essential needs of that story, defined and asserted in the difficult process of the author's slow comprehension of and service to those needs.

In diversity lies the strength of any species and of any society—diversity without divisiveness, diversity congruent with unity, but not with uniformity. What virtue has solidarity that lacks regard for the urgencies of solitude? What merit is there in solitude that deliberately inhibits all impulse to solicitude?

The only creed common to serious (not necessarily solemn) writers might be a determination to be as honest instruments as possible of insight and reconciliation, of persuasive and sometimes ritualistic power, through vision and revision—instruments of revelation, of endless probes into alternative possibilities that plenitude of literary forms and human forums constantly provides.