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Introduction

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Introduction

SOLEDAD S. REYES

In 1995, *Philippine Studies* came out with its literary issue edited by poet/critic Emmanuel Torres. In his Introduction, Torres raised the possibility of the journal “playing host to creative writing more often, say, every ten years instead of once every twenty.” Torres continued:

Such practice would be doing a morale-boosting service to writers who have kept faith in the literary text as we know it in an age increasingly hooked on video, pricey comic books, graphic novels, the Magic Eye mania, and the interactive games of computer technology. It is service certainly welcome in a milieu where the media give far greater attention to the visual and performance arts than to literature.

This year *Philippine Studies* is devoting not one but two issues to new writing from the Philippines to underscore, in these perilous times of international terrorism, globalization, borderless wars, geopolitical realignments, cataclysmic events, and the rise and fall of governments, the significance of literature. These cultural artifacts have, in the last few decades, been marginalized in a world that is consumed by all types of virtual reality and startling sound bytes easily available through technology. Collectively taken, the texts in this anthology are graphic reminders that, in the numerous discourses that shape the everyday life of Filipinos, literature offers some of the most constant and trenchant insights into the specificities of our experience as a people.

Reinserting the creative act into the mainstream of contemporary Philippine life is a necessary task. The venues for writing have almost

disappeared, with the exception of a few campus journals, magazine supplements, and a small number of books published by hardy and intrepid publishers—bless their souls. Despite the odds, our writers continue to seek in language the means to constitute disparate realities in both the private and public realms, and eventually make the reader complicit in the act of producing meanings through which we can “make sense of our lives,” in the words of the English critic Jack Kermode.

The last ten years have seen the passing away of writers whose stellar achievements have left deep imprints on the cultural landscape. In English the voices of Bienvenido Santos, N. V. M. Gonzalez, Nick Joaquin, Wilfredo Nollado, Edilberto Tiempo, Francisco Arcellana, Angela Manalang Gloria, among other writers, have now been stilled. In Filipino the likes of Rogelio Sicat, Mike Bigornia, Rosario de Guzman Lingat, Rolando Tinio, Liwayway Arceo, to name a few, have left us with a rich legacy of exceptionally fine writing.

Those writers spoke mostly to generations born in the postwar years, growing up in a conflicted society which imaged itself as the “woman with two navels” and the “bamboo dancers” mostly for writers in English searching for that elusive Filipino identity. Contemporaneous with this search, on the other hand, was the journey undertaken by writers in Filipino such as Amado V. Hernandez and Lazaro Francisco and their discovery of the Janus-faced entity—the country as both “*bayang malaya*” and “*daluyong*.” In those days, a wide gap separated the writers in English and those in Filipino due to sociocultural reasons.

Writers younger than Nick Joaquin and Amado V. Hernandez, working on their art in the last decades of the twentieth century, continued to ask the questions: What is art? And for whom is it? We saw samples of these concerns in the works of Rio Alma and Lamberto Antonio, Ruth Elynia Mabanglo, Ninotchka Rosca, Jose Dalisay, Norma Miraflor, among others, in a period when a perceptible shift in language took place, as a result of the wide-ranging impact of Marxist thinking especially in the 1970s and 1980s. The simplistic opposition between English literature and its perceived adherence to literature abstracted from time and place, on one hand, and Filipino literature with its openness to Marxist thought (especially in academe and in the underground) was problematized. By the 1980s, a few writers were almost effortlessly shifting from English to Filipino and back (e.g., Jose

Dalisay, Jose Lacaba, Bienvenido Noriega Jr., Isagani Cruz, Rolando Tinio, Aida Santos, Danton Remoto), and writing was no longer exclusively in one language but unleashing and reveling in the imaginative power inhering in the two languages.

However, the bias against writing in Filipino persisted in the bastion of English writing—the country's academe. Too long associated with those colorful weekly magazines *Liwayway* and *Aliwan*, literature in Filipino remained undervalued because they were thought to be “escapist, sentimental, didactic fare.” This notion was pervasive despite the exceptional fiction written by the likes of the *Mga Agos sa Disyerto* and *Sigwa* writers, and outstanding poems published by Rio Alma, Lamberto Antonio, and Rogelio Mangahas. Their output rivaled the most arresting and riveting poems and stories of those writing in English.

The attitude seems to have changed, and both bodies of writing are now allowed to occupy central stage as equals. A major factor in this change is the fact that writing in Filipino is no longer sourced in weekly magazines, most of which started to disappear in the late 1980s. At the forefront of writing in Filipino are young poets and writers of fiction and creative non-fiction based in academe, themselves teaching fiction and short story, probably pursuing graduate studies, and are as knowledgeable as their English counterparts in the labyrinthine ways of postmodernism and postcolonialism. Contemporary writers in Filipino, like their counterparts in English, have represented a world which unarguably carries with it the burdens of the new millennium.

Philippine literature in English reviewed in its historical context, on the other hand, evolved from the early 1900s as a discourse associated with the public schools and especially with the University of the Philippines. Its practitioners, both in creative and critical fields, came mostly from colleges and universities, and to the productions were attached the prestige usually associated with such academic institutions as the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, the University of Santo Tomas, Silliman University, De La Salle University, to name a few. A patina surrounded the English texts, for which reason they were made to occupy canonical positions in the literary hierarchy established by academic critics.

Happily, much of contemporary writing has effectively blurred the distinctions between works in English and those in the other languages, where in the past decades the former were privileged over the latter.

As significantly, the works included in this double issue reflect not only the various trends that shape the development of literature not only in English and Filipino, and in Bikol as well, but as importantly, the continued and vigorous attempts to constitute various realities in innovative and diverse ways. Reading them is to be aware of the agonizingly complicated process of creation/production that is a consequence of the still ongoing debate between Formalism and Marxism, and the current impact of postmodernist thought.

These realities range from the deeply personal to the more political, from the richly nuanced musing on love and death, to the stirring but always controlled denunciation of imperialism. The texts also display a persistent and almost obsessive return to the past to recover from it what was once a unified vision of life, a wholeness that no longer exists in this highly fractured world. The modalities and strategies the writers employ bespeak of their awareness of the need to position themselves as artisans and producers of meaning.

Will Ortiz's powerful but tightly structured poem, "Anino," exemplifies the poet's remarkable control of his material that poignantly speaks of estrangement and loss:

May puwang
Ang mga pagitan.

Sumusuot sa mga sulok ng silid,
Walang sinasambit na kataga
At walang anumang babala
Sa nakapinid na bintana.

Nag-iiwan lamang
ng patak ng ulan
sa bubong na sira,
at walang
hinugasang agiw
sa binubukbok
na haligi ng gunita.

(Kanina ko lamang naalala
isandaang taon na pala tayong
di magkakilala.)

Ni wala man lamang
akong mahawakan
kundi anino mong
dinala ng buwan.

Compare this poem with the quintessentially romantic/didactic “Takipsilim at Lumang Lambat” by Teo Baylen, for example, and we realize how poetry in Filipino has gone a long way from conventionalized modes of depicting the world to a new and more confident exploration of poetic landscapes.

On the other hand, Mila Aguilar’s poem, “Fat Mayas,” drives home the reality of otherness imaged in an apparently casual, albeit subtly, delicate way. The persona speaks of a small bird like the maya which, she remembers, always “come in flocks” in the Philippines. She muses:

Here they are fatter;
Still brown, after having
Earned some black
But much less

Lithe than
Where they come from
And they are
Called something else,
I’m sure.
And then they do not
Flock, as they do in
Their native land.

In the succeeding days
I would see one more per day,
Still alone, flying unto
Gutters and eaves.

How I grieved for them,
Full as they were
With the abundance
Of a foreign land.

Many of the writers in the anthology are established names in poetry and fiction. They include such poets as Gémino Abad, Ricardo de Ungria, Ruth Elynia Mabanglo, Gode Calleja, Oscar Peñaranda, and expatriate writers Luis Francia and Luis Cabalquinto. The younger poets include Arkaye Kierulf, Jema Pamintuan, Naya Valdellon, Edgar Samar, Joey Ogatis, John Labella, Allan Popa, to name a few. For the first time, poems in Bikol have been included in the anthology, thus allowing the readers a glimpse of the kind of literary production in the vernacular languages, which, much to the consternation of regional writers, has been often marginalized by imperial Manila.

The works of award-winning fictionists in English such as Jose Dalisay Jr., Connie Maraán, Alfred [Krip] Yuson (who contributes a story in Filipino), Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, and Fran Ng, for example, are also in the anthology. But today's readers will now be introduced to the works of younger fictionists that include Nonon V. Carandang, Alvin Yapan, and Nicolas Lacson, among others, whose stories display a wide range of themes and an innovative deployment of fictional resources.

A genre that has attracted a great deal of attention among the writers in the last ten years is creative nonfiction, where various established literary conventions in the other genres (poetry, fiction, drama, essay, film) have been explored to deal with very often intensely personal experiences creatively filtered and processed by the text's persona. These texts, painstakingly extracted from their lives, are what such writers as Gilda Cordero-Fernando, Wilfredo O. Pascual, Emeniano Acain Somoza Jr., Juaniyo Arcellana, among others, offer the readers. In each of these works, the reader undergoes a journey where the turns and twists of a personal encounter, the impact of a fleeting moment in time, the multilayered scenes of one's childhood, to name a few, are reconstituted in different ways.

Capturing an irretrievable past by deftly utilizing a whole slew of metaphors shapes the trajectory of a large number of works as seen, for example, in the forceful and evocative "Mistulang Pulo" by Alfred Yuson and the hauntingly tragic "Ang Birhen sa Paanan ng Buwaya" by Alvin Yapan. Realism is no longer the operative mode, which was what defined numerous stories in the 1970s and 1980s, both in English and Filipino. Instead we see a landscape replete with surreal images and situations ordinarily found in romance and fantasy, and we hear a voice

that uncannily evokes ancient tellers of tales weaving their magic in front of a mesmerized audience.

There are texts that deal with more contemporary realities, searing the mind and moving the heart, as the authors seize on facets of the collective experience of exploitation as in Romulo Baquiran's "Anghel ng Kalayaan," the trafficking of women in Jose Mario Francisco's "Dayuhan sa Bangkok: Paano Kausapin ang Puta I," the notion of beginnings in Edgar Samar's "Kuwentong Bayan," or in the powerful deconstructive reading of the life of a superstar and a star-struck fan in "Devotion" by Eminiano Acain Somoza Jr. Written in different modes, and appropriating diverse writing traditions, these and other texts offer a fresher way of apprehending our world.

Taken collectively, the texts in this anthology offer a clear window to the world of contemporary Philippine writing—its open-ended relationship to history and society, its almost insatiable quest for the most appropriate modes and strategies to approximate the richness and diversity of personal and collective experience, the tensions it must confront as it seeks a delicate balance between an inherited body of conventions and the need to locate the self in an increasingly globalized and infinitely more complicated world. That Filipino writers continue to labor at their craft, relentlessly and passionately, augurs well for us who live in the present, and for those who will look back and see the achievements of several generations of our writers included in this anthology.