

# A POETICS OF THE LITERARY WORK

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Let me begin with a general perspective on the mind, language, and the literary work, and end on our country's literature.

## Mind

1. The human person is the only being on earth that seeks truth in knowledge. *Truth-seeking* then is our *essence or nature as human*. Only the truth satisfies and fulfills our nature; every person has sole responsibility for, and answers to, his being. Only the truth underwrites humanity's destiny.

What we call "reality" is only our human reality. We have no ready access to the consciousness of other beings in the world. A cat's perception of reality is its own: the living of it. All our knowing then in the sciences and humanities is a quest for truth in our experience of the world.

The quest for *meaning* in one's own experience is the personal aspect of the quest for the *truth* of things in nature and in human affairs. But what meaning dwells in our experience is only its interpretation as its truth. One's meaning isn't always truth: e.g., a court's interpretation of a law or an empirical observation in a scientific inquiry. Even in science, a theory has a certain life-span. Thus, what we call the "universal plane" isn't the realm of eternal verities, but rather, the site of everlasting quest. Where there are no questions, the quest ceases.

2. Mind and imagination are one. Without imagination, there is no thinking nor intuition beyond concept. "Concepts without intuition are empty," says Immanuel Kant; "intuitions without concept are blind."<sup>1</sup>

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1 From Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.

It is the imagination makes real to the mind what the mind abstracts from our experience, what it perceives or intuits in the world. Thus, *what is most imagined is what is most real*. All great thinkers and scholars, scientists, artists, inventors have a lively imagination.

From our own experience, from other lives lived, we draw our world-view, moral compass, ideals, faiths – all abstract, but alive in our mind’s imagination. Our truth is where love, goodness, beauty are one. These words – “love, beauty, goodness” – are all abstract, but their meaning lights up in our imagination, and thence, in our speech and deed. In the end, the genius or tutelary spirit in Imagination shall save our Earth and humanity.

### Language

1. Language is the finest invention of the human imagination and thus, language and imagination are one. By Language, I mean all the world’s languages; in that light, Language is everyone’s Mother Tongue, the metaphor “tongue” implying that we would savor our living of Life. In the beginning is the word, because without language, we would have no memory, no history, no culture, no civilization. All languages evolve over time, drawing from each other for meaningfulness of expression in a given culture through its history. I would never use the word “vernacular” for any of our Philippine languages, for vernacular in Latin means “a slave born in his master’s house.”

Language speaks our being or nature *as human*. As Eduardo Galeano wondrously puts it: “If the grape is made of wine, then perhaps we are the words that tell who we are.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, too, how we imagine ourselves is how our future dreams us.

2. Language is commonly understood as lexical: words to read; its *being* or nature is *truth-saying* as it speaks. In any language, “honor” is honor, and “*tokhang*” is tokhang. No equivocation: all our words speak true. The word in its own context evokes an image; the image lights up its meaning. It is only the individual who abuses language to lie and deceive himself and others. *Ab-use* is from Latin *abusus, abuti*, “to misuse, waste” – thus, when one scoffs at “human rights,” he lies! and wastes his *being*, degrades his human nature.

3. Every art work – not just the literary work but also painting, sculpture, etc. – has its own respective language as medium or mode of

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2 Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*, tr. Cedric Belfrage with Mark Schafer (W.W. Norton, 1992): 18.

expression to represent an aspect or feature of our reality: in music, for instance, its medium is sound and silence; in drama, film, and dance, the medium is theatre as performance. If then the nature or essence of Language is *truth-saying*, it follows that the being or nature of all the arts is as *bearer of meaning*: that is, the meaning of our humanity, its nightshade and its sunrise. Even in the natural and social sciences where words, numbers, and symbols are their medium, Language is the Muse and Imagination the spirit-guide.

Since the Imagination opens up infinite possibilities of expression, there are various kinds of creative work in all the arts, and each kind over time secretes its own criteria of excellence. Consequently, there are many theories and approaches to creativity.

Robert Frost says: "The greatest adventure of man is science, the adventure of penetrating into *matter*, into the material universe... [That] adventure us our property, *a human property* [that is, our imaginative construct of the material universe, ... But] the best description of us is the humanities."<sup>3</sup> [all brackets & italics mine]

## The Literary Work

Let me focus on the poem, the generic term for literary work, as exemplary of all the other arts (where *poet* is the figure for all artists).

1. Language as a conceptual, evocative, labile system of representation is our only means to translate into an apprehensible form our thoughts and feelings about our world *in our time and culture*. The meanings of our words do not arise from themselves, or from their differential play, so much as from *lives lived* in a given historical time and culture. Since the poem is a representation (*mimesis*) of an experience *as lived or as imagined*, its *being* or essence is its meaningfulness or *diwa* (spirit, soul). That meaningfulness bears the poet's intuition (insight or inscape): a luminance of thought that no idea expresses, a radiance of feeling that no thought apprehends.

2. The poem isn't *written* in any given historical language like English or Tagalog so much as *wrought from* it toward the meaning or *saysay* of the experience it stimulates. The poet forges his own path through the lexical wilderness where the words contend for their own image and meaning, and echo their provenance, and the poet makes his own clearing where no words

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<sup>3</sup> From Richard Poirier's interview of Robert Frost in *Writers at Work/ The Paris Review*, Second Series (Viking Press, 1963; Penguin Books, 1977): 23.

break. Over time, the poet discovers his own way with language, his distinctive style which Albert Camus defines as “the simultaneous existence of reality and the mind that gives that reality its form.”<sup>4</sup> *The care for words is care of light.*

The poet seeks the light of the living experience itself. To write then is to get real, to breathe life into language. And thus, finally, the poem isn't its language, it is *the living become word. The poem is to live.*

3. The poem is already a reading or interpretation of the poet's experience, as lived or as imagined. It bears its meaningfulness reader to reader. Thus, the poem has a life of its own over the course of time. As we read, and imagine, drawing from our own experience of living, we are also read. Through our own reflection and introspection, the literary work communicates with and affirms our *being* or *nature*. This is how the poem humanizes us: enriches and deepens our nature as human. “Every great work,” says Albert Camus, “makes the human face more admirable and richer, and this is its whole secret.”<sup>5</sup>

## Country

I end on our country today.

I think of Philippine literature as one archipelago of letters wrought from many languages, including English and Spanish, both of which have been assimilated over time into our various indigenous languages like Tagalog, Sugbuanon, Iloko, Bikol, etc. – all as much *Filipino* as that evolving Tagalog-based *Pilipino* that eventually, through great writing *from* it, will become truly our national language.

1. It bears stressing that any language can express anything at all that the mind seeks to grasp because writing is a *discipline* of what the words are made to do such that what is *wrought* can, through the evocative power of imagination (on both the writer's and the reader's part), transcend the inherent inadequacies of any language to probe and encompass all of Reality. As Ezra Pound says, the writer's job of work is “to keep the language efficient.”<sup>6</sup> The *sense for language* is the basic *poetic* sense, our most intimate sense of our reality. It needs to be cultivated and nurtured through reading and education.

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4 Camus, *The Rebel: an Essay on Man in Revolt* (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1951): 271.

5 [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert\\_Camus](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert_Camus). Camus, “Create Dangerously,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, Death*, op. cit.:269.

6 Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (1934), chap. 3: “Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.”

It isn't language that deteriorates as it evolves, but rather, the sense for it.

The poet deals in daily life with his own native tongue and with English which is still the medium of instruction in our school system. That very fact may even be a distinct advantage: that is, if he is sensitive and observant, he might become more familiar with that *space between languages* where precisely he must struggle for clearer expression of his insights through his language of choice. The writer *works* the language as the farmer works the soil to bear his crop. The ground of language which he has imbibed from childhood and has shaped his own consciousness is his own community's world-view and culture; thus, he is already *spoken for*, and yet, he may *counter-say* it to express his own perception or intuition as regards his community's way of looking and feeling.

2. Since the meanings of our words arise mainly from lives lived through a people's history and culture, the poem's inmost seal is the poet's country. Our country is how we imagine her, as when say, "Inang Bayan." If so, our country is what our people's imagination owes its allegiance to. Our literature by our writers is what creates our sense of country, which ultimately is forged by our sense for language. As National Artist Nick Joaquin says: "To remember and to sing: that is my vocation."<sup>7</sup> Memory is Imagination's heartland. "Recordar", says Eduardo Galeano, "To remember; from the Latin *re-cordis*, to pass back through the heart."<sup>8</sup>

To stress our point. "Nation" is a legal fiction enshrined in our 1987 Constitution as our people's dream or vision of an ideal democratic homeland where people are sovereign and their leaders are their *public servants*. One with imagination does not have to be a lawyer to grasp the abstract ideal of a just and humane society. It is in our imagination where the words come alive and speak true.

3. Our country today is in crisis. The word "crisis" is from Greek *krinein*, meaning "to divide or discriminate and judge." A time of crisis then is a time of division and judgment. The Greek word *krinein* also gives the English words "criticism" and "criterion." Our leaders must listen well, not play deaf, and be sensitive to, and not resent, criticism; and there are criteria for a right judgment which presupposes integrity of character and a sound, discerning mind.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Joaquin, *Prose and Poems*; intro. by Teodoro M. Locsin (Manila: Graphic House, 1952): 322. Reprint by Bookmark, Inc., 1991: 475.

<sup>8</sup> Galeano's own epigraph to his *The Book of Embraces*, tr. Cedric Belfrage with Mark Schorer (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1992): 18.

Our troubled times over the whole world pose a severe challenge to our humanity, to our mind's power of abstraction and critical thinking in quest of truth at the very heart of freedom and democracy. When we speak today of "human rights", what meaning or vision, what truth about humanity, dwells in that phrase? *Ubuntu*, says Nelson Mandela: "I am because we are." What Mandela says is at the core of human dignity. We need imagination to grasp the spirit of what he says.

4. Is there much to be desired about our sense of country from our day-to-day experience among our own people? It cannot be said that our writers since Balagtas, Rizal and *La Solidaridad* were ever mute. Without the writer, the poor and oppressed among us have no voice else. Writers – and most certainly, other artists and scholars – read us and interpret us to ourselves upon our own ground, that is, our culture and our history. They sharpen our sense of country because they strengthen our power of abstraction and imagination. In short, our literature *wrought from* whatever language, in whatever genre, is our people's memory. *A country is only as strong as her people's memory!*

The writer stands upon his own ground, his own native clearing; the way his fellow-countrymen think and feel about their world, and so live from sun to sun. There, in that clearing, he forges language in the smithy of his mind and heart and grasps his own authentic self. There, in the poetry as wrought, if one reads close and imagines well, the poet (and certainly, other artists and scholars) may well be his own country's best critic and interpreter, and thereby, he might refresh or enrich a current vision of his country's destiny, or renew a lost heritage or even transform it.

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