

TOWARD PRIDE OF PLACE FOR LITERATURE AND THE ARTS IN ACADEME

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This year, the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies celebrates the fifth anniversary of its revival after a hiatus of four years. To mark the event, the Center is releasing five issues of its peer-reviewed literary journal, *Tomás*, within the third quarter of the year, one issue for each of the major literary genres (fiction, poetry, nonfiction, drama, and literary criticism). Each volume has a different Issue Editor and Managing Editor but all are Resident Fellows of the Center.

I thought this might also be a good opportunity to rethink the question which we writers are repeatedly called upon to confront: why does the study of literature and creative writing matter? In fact, in academe these days, it isn't only the study of literature that requires defending, but the concept of General Education. The recent dramatic shift in the University of the Philippines' GE policy, which now allows colleges to require a minimum of only 21 GE units (instead of 45 units) is uncomfortably close to home. In that face-off, we were told, it was the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) faculty who argued for the reduction of GE units, and the HUMSS (Humanities, Social Sciences) faculty who argued for the retention of the original number. This is hardly a surprise.

I am reminded of something John Meacham said in an essay published in the October 7, 2013 issue of *Time* magazine. (Meacham is Ran-

dom House's executive editor and EVP. He is a former editor-in-chief of *Newsweek*, a contributing editor to *Time*, editor-at-large of WNET, and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for the Autobiography/Biography.) In that essay on the Core Curriculum issue, or "the conflict between knowledge and know-how," he wrote: "What is heartening to those who believe in the value of a passing acquaintance with Homer and the Declaration of Independence and Jane Austen and Toni Morrison, as well as basic scientific literacy, is that there is little argument over the human and economic utility of a mind trained to make connections between seemingly disparate elements of reality. The college graduate who can think creatively is going to stand the greatest chance of not only doing well, but doing some good too. As long as the liberal-arts tradition remains a foundation of the curriculum in even the most elective of collegiate systems, there is hope that graduates will be able to discuss the Gettysburg Address—in a job interview at Google."

So that's the *practical argument* for retaining a liberal arts education: it makes the graduate more—not less—competitive in the global job market.

Maybe we could pause for a minute here and revisit one phrase in that passage—*Doing some good*. How exactly does a study of literature and the arts help students to do that?

"In recent years all the more oversimplified political viewpoints have failed, and our awareness of the complexity of the society we live in has grown, even if no one can claim to have a solution in his pocket. The situation in Italy today is on the one hand a state of deterioration and corruption in our institutional framework, and on the other of a growing collective maturity and search for ways of governing ourselves. What is the place of literature in such a situation?"

The quotation is from an essay titled "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature" by Italo Calvino, and he was referring to Italy in the 70s. But, he might have been talking about the Philippines today.

In fact, last February, that very question was raised by a member of the audience during the "Bookstop Tour" organized by the National Book Development Board (NBDB) as part of the celebrations of National Literature Month. Marne Kilates, Chuckberry Pascual and I were the writers invited by the UST Publishing House to be its featured authors when the

book tour stopped at its new bookstore in the UST Main Building. “What are you doing about our current political situation?” this woman asked pointedly. The three of us hesitated before replying.

In the Italy that Calvino was describing, society demanded “that the writer raise his voice if he wants to be heard, propose ideas that will have an impact on the public, push all his instinctive reactions to extremes. But even the most sensational and explosive statements pass over the heads of readers. All is as nothing, like the sound of the wind.”

Did we hesitate because we felt, as Calvino did, that nothing the writers say will be of any consequence to most Filipinos? Or did we hesitate because in *this* society no one actually makes such demands of writers because the writers are themselves of no consequence to most Filipinos?

I believe that, whether one fears the first or the second, as writers, we need to answer the question, for ourselves first, and then for the rest of society. Because, from the very beginnings of history, literature has been, not just a means of self-expression, but a means of self-awareness.

Calvino’s concern in that essay (as it was, I feel, the concern of the woman who put the question to us in UST) was with literature’s political uses, and he mentioned two: to give voice to whatever is without a voice, to give a name to what has yet no name, “especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude;” and “to impose patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, of the correlation of facts, and in short, the creation... of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action...” (1986, 98-99)

But in 1988, in the posthumously published *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he focused on the larger scene. He noted that the millennium about to end was “the millennium of the book, in that it has seen the object we call a book take on the form now familiar to us. Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium’s end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called postindustrial era of technology.”

His own attitude was completely optimistic. “My confidence in literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it.” (1993, 1) Literature, he said, has an existential function: the search for lightness as a response to the unbearable burden or weight of living. The example he offered was Milan

Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which "is in reality a bitter confirmation of the Ineluctible Weight of Living, not only in the situation of his hapless country, but in the human condition common to us all, no matter how infinitely more comfortable we may be." (7) The novel, said Calvino, "shows us how everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight. Perhaps only the liveliness and mobility of the intelligence escape this sentence—the very qualities with which this novel is written, and which belong to a world quite different from the one we live in." (7)

He stressed that he was not referring to a literature of escape. Rather, he meant that "in the boundless universe of literature, there are always new avenues to be explored, both very recent and very ancient, styles and forms that can change our image of the world. (7-8)

(Of course, Calvino added that he also looked to science—and to computer science—to nourish his "visions in which all heaviness disappears.")

Calvino is not alone in believing that at the heart of great literature are moral issues. This does not mean that the writer offers pat "moral lessons." Rather, in the words of another writer, Susan Sontag: "... A fiction writer whose adherence is to literature is necessarily someone who thinks about moral problems: about what is just and unjust, what is better and worse, what is repulsive and admirable, what is lamentable and what inspires joy and approbation... Serious fiction writers think about problems *practically*. They tell stories. They narrate. They evoke our common humanity in narratives which we can identify, even though the lives may be remote from our own. They stimulate our imagination. The stories enlarge and complicate—and therefore, improve—our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgment."

So that, then, is the *higher or nobler reason* for retaining a liberal arts education, where literature and the humanities have pride of place.

Which brings me back to the situation in our own country, a country constantly beleaguered by crises, both natural and man-made, and at this moment confronted by the possibility of martial law being imposed on the entire country yet again, while still trying to come to terms with an administration not averse to erasing the distinction between real news and "fake news," or of depriving some of its own citizens—such as persons suspected

of being drug users—from basic human rights. I would suggest—as I have done more than once before—that during dark days, perhaps the place to seek solace, strength and salvation, is literature.

I feel the need to add that I refer here to “serious literature,” but with a further qualification: by “serious literature” is not meant literature that is solemn or super-cerebral, i.e. boring or incomprehensible. The literature I refer to might be light, funny, even whimsical in style and tone. It may be in print or on line. It is, simply, literature produced by serious artists, i.e., men and women who are serious about what they do, who produce work in which the stakes are high, for both themselves and for their readers. In short, it is literature produced by writers who risk much, by putting into their work what they truly care about, what they consider important. In so doing, they hope that readers will accept the challenge, and be engaged or disturbed or uplifted... perhaps, sometimes, all three.

All that is well and good. On the other hand, there’s the reality. And the reality is that, even in academic institutions, we in the arts feel the need to constantly assert that the work we do is at least *as important as*, and deserves to be *valued as much as*, the work being done by the people in science and technology. But if the arts must struggle for a place even in academe, how dismal must be their chances in the larger society?

I have been asked: how exactly are literature and creative writing to thrive in the academe? My reply is to describe an imagined scenario where they already *are* thriving. I speak of a healthy literary community, consisting of students who like books, who actually buy books, and read them, who belong to book clubs or literary societies, mentored by members of the faculty who are themselves lovers of the written word. Both students and faculty participate in, or at least attend, literary readings, book launchings, literature conferences and the like, not because they are herded into them, but because they are actually interested in these activities and derive pleasure from them. They subscribe and/or contribute to, or produce literary journals. Support for these activities is accompanied by incentives for the faculty to produce both creative and critical work—literary grants and literary awards, literary journals, a creative writing center, a publishing house that publishes literary titles along with scholarly titles. And, most importantly, writers and the literary scholars in the faculty feel that their outputs are valued as highly as those of the scientists, or of the faculty of the professional colleges, who bring in the money.

I must say that UST has not been remiss in this. Many of these mechanisms are already in place. Members of the University's different Research Centers (which now include the Center for Creative Writing) are honored by the Office of the Vice Rector for Research and Innovation with the Silver Series and Gold series award; and the Faculty Union grants the *Dangal ng UST* Award to both scholars and creative writers. The UST Publishing House which is largely subsidized by the University, was named Publisher of the Year, a few years ago, by the Manila Critics Circle and the National Book Development Board (NBDB), mainly because its literary titles won a large number of awards. The Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies was revived by the University, and is now manned by a corps of writers who are full-time faculty members, selected on the basis of their literary credentials, and who run its programs and projects, (all of them funded by the University) with the collaboration of the Faculty of Arts & Letters' Literature Department, and the Graduate School, as well as the student organization UST Literary Society (or UST LitSoc). There is an active Thomasian Writers' Guild, a student organization which draws its members from several colleges. All of these initiatives are geared toward revitalizing a literary culture on campus, but many of the activities are open to the public. *Tomas*, our literary journal accepts contributions, not just from Thomasian writers and scholars, but from distinguished national and even international writers. And it welcomes, as well, promising young writers.

Perhaps the tallest dream is for the University to put in place an Arts Development Program, which would coordinate all the university's artistic initiatives, and a Cultural Center, with first-class facilities for all the arts, headed by a top caliber arts manager, reporting directly to the Rector himself. I think that this is eminently do-able in UST, with its long tradition of excellence in music, the visual arts, architecture and literature, and its world-class museum and library. What is missing is a theater company. (In my time, there was the Aquinas Dramatic Guild, much respected both inside and outside the campus.)

The rationale for such a program and such a center would go beyond university rankings and accreditations. The rationale would be that the University's top administrators wish to establish and sustain a dynamic artistic culture in the university, because they believe in the importance of culture and the arts for national development.

Again, UST is admirably placed to play a leading role in such an artistic renaissance. One need only recall her most famous son—a renaissance man if ever there was one—Dr. Jose Rizal, who pioneered in practically all the literary genres (including children’s literature and comic books), but was also a man of science; and offered his abundant gifts in the service of his country.

And now I see that I have hit upon what could well be the strongest argument yet for giving literature—and the writers who produce it—a place of honor in academe.

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