

Stepping Forward at 400: The Literary Production of UST

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As an academic center for the production of young literary writing, UST did not figure prominently in the firmament of critics until a young man named Wilfrido D. Nollo do came into the horizon. In 1953, the Marian Year National Literary Competition picked Nollo do's short story "The Beginning" as First Prize winner. Nollo do had not attended the Silliman Writers Workshop, then the arbiter of what was considered as well-crafted writing in English as per the standards of the American New Criticism. Neither did Nollo do come from the University of the Philippines where the arsenal of creative writing luminaries was turning out winners in the annual Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature.

UST in the 1950s was best known for its Colleges of Law and Medicine, so the emergence of Nollo do broke the public impression that UST was insignificant as a producer of young writing. Now, on its 400th year as an institution, it is high time that its important contribution to Philippine literature be counted. While it has always run an academic unit emphasizing the creative arts in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, no all-out effort has to date been made to name the UST authors who made their mark in the history of Philippine literature.

As early as the decade of the Thirties, two writers had appeared to change the course of Philippine writing. The first was Alejandro G. Abadilla whose rebellious temper took him to the US West Coast away from his family in Cavite. The time was a period of ferment in the literary

scene in the US, and working as a journalist in the Filipino communities Abadilla had apparently come in contact with radical American writing. When he returned to the Philippines in 1931, he enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters and obtained a Ph.B. major in Philosophy.

The Commonwealth was inaugurated in 1935, and the prospect of independence excited young people dreaming of a cultural renaissance for Filipinos. A new writers' group calling itself Panitikan arose, and Abadilla was among its organizers. Panitikan wanted to break away from writing that popular weeklies like *Lidayway* had made the orthodoxy. In 1940, Abadilla managed to get *Lidayway* to put "Ako ang Daigdig." The poem created a scandal. It did away with the standard syllabic count of Tagalog versification. It violated the conventional stanzaic arrangement of lines. It did not observe the rules of capitalization. It was "free," verse that was then unknown in the pages of a popular weekly.

In his slim volumes of poetry, *Ako ang Daigdig at Iba Pang Tula* (1955) and *Piniling mga Tula ni AGA* (1965), Abadilla waged his personal aesthetics even as contemporaries in Panitikan doubted the validity of the changes he wanted to bring into the writing of Tagalog poetry. He also wrote prose, asserting his anti-conventionality as a critic of poetry and editor of various textbooks and anthologies. With young fictionist Elpidio Kapulong, he co-wrote the novel *Pagkamulat ni Magdalena* (1958), provoking controversy with its candor (unusual in its time) in the portrayal of the sex act in a Tagalog novel. In the textbook-cum-anthologies that he edited for use in high school and early college, he pursued his advocacy for the modernization of Tagalog writing. Indeed, Abadilla can legitimately claim the honor of infusing a sense of the modern in the study and the writing of Tagalog literature. Through him, UST can claim a share in the honor of contributing to the forward growth of Philippine writing in general.

A second pathbreaker from the 1930s was the BSE graduate Genoveva Edroza, whose Tagalog stories, in the innovative tradition of Panitikan, of which she was a member, changed the content of Tagalog fiction. Where the usual stories in popular magazines were plain narratives appealing for their plot twists and turns, Edroza's fiction probed with sensitivity and insight the inner lives of her characters. In her hands, the short story became more than entertainment reading; it held the reader's interest because it

allowed the reader to understand other people and to feel with them. Edroza's collection of early stories and essays *Ako'y Isang Tinig* has served as a standard reference in high schools and colleges. Her most popular work is perhaps "*Kuwento ni Mabuti*" which tells with great restraint the pathetic story of a prim schoolteacher who confides her own past indiscretion to assuage the grief of a troubled female student. Told from the point of view of the young girl who idolized the teacher, the narrative reverberates with implications of youthful awakening and the beginnings of mature compassion.

Edroza continued to write through several crucial periods of our history, and when she died she left behind stories that recorded the lives of Filipinos as they experienced the Pacific War, the turmoil of the Liberation years, the tensions of the Martial Law period, and the insecurities of the years of seeking employment abroad. As a faithful recordist of the times, she had through her fiction made readers remember and understand their society and the various issues that it has had to weather through the years.

The post-Pacific War years saw the arrival in UST of two students from the Ilocos region who were to find a place in Philippine writing in English. The first was a restless peasant-boy from Pangasinan who immediately stood out and established a reputation for intellectual leadership. He was Francisco Sionil Jose, a Philosophy and Letters student whose training in journalism was to earn him the post of editor-in-chief of *The Varsitarian*. Without finishing his college studies, he moved on to a career in journalism, travelling all over the country, covering big stories and absorbing the culture and the political and economic issues facing the nation. In 1959, he broke into the literary scene with a short story that won the top prize in the Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. "The God Stealer" was about a citified Igorot tourist guide who stole his grandfather's "god" to gift to an American tourist, and suffered as a consequence a tortuous reintegration into the culture of his tribe for desecrating his people's tradition.

"The God Stealer" was Jose's first creative work to catch the attention of critics, and its socio-cultural content was to get further elaboration in his subsequent fiction which saw a journalistic eye for cultural detail wedded to a richly inventive narrative skill. In Jose the critics found a disconcerting talent whose creative drive defied the literary fashion set by the New Critics in the academe who prized formalist correctness in language and craft. The

five novels comprising what is now known as the Rosales Saga—*Po-on (Poon)*, *Tree*, *My Brother*, *My Executioner*, *The Pretenders*, and *Mass*—trace the history of the Filipino people’s struggle against colonial domination, class suppression, cultural decay and political corruption, a prose epic that no previous writer had attempted before.

Among Filipino writers, Jose stands alone as the only one with an international reputation, having been translated into more than 25 languages from Europe, Latin America, the Far East and Southeast Asia. Indeed, when the Nobel Prize committee is able to turn its gaze to writing in Southeast Asia, Jose is the likeliest to catch its eye.

Contemporaneous with Jose was Juan Capiendo Tuvera, another Ilocano and also a journalist. Tuvera’s fiction earned high encomium from Edith Tiempo, the matriarch of fine writing, in the introduction to *Stories and Other Writings*. Tuvera’s treatment of the lives of peasants in the Ilocos countryside is noted: “All this the writer’s pen etches with meticulous and restrained carefulness, and thereby extracting a terrible beauty out of the human agony endured, and breeding a species of love and tenderness for the human being in his portion of mortality and frailness.”

The Palanca was the venue that called early attention to Tuvera’s talent when it awarded top honors to “Ceremony” (1955) and “High into Morning” (1957). A narrative set in the war-torn Vietnam of the 1950s, “High into Morning” tells about a Filipino employed by the US forces and his truncated casual love affair with a girl who could not settle down in any one place. Tuvera, in the early 1950s, was telling a story that anticipated the mood of the existentialist 1960s, delineating the sense of emptiness and futility when loving and permanent relationship eluded men and women wandering about in an alien setting racked by war.

In his later years, Tuvera was drawn to serve the reactionary bureaucracy of the Marcos dictatorship, and the expected culmination of a fine creative writing career failed to yield the masterpieces of his mature years.

Juan T. Gatbontgon was an undergraduate student in 1951 when his story “Clay” was published by the *Philippines Free Press*, and subsequently won First Prize in the magazine’s annual competition. The story is about a 16-year old boy in a small town in Pampanga early in the postwar years who had been befriended by an American G.I. named Clayton. Proud of

his new-found friend, he introduces the soldier to his favorite teacher Miss Rosete. Clayton takes the teacher to a dance in the camp, and later within hearing of the boy, brags to fellow G.I.s about his sexual conquest of the native woman. The boy is crushed, disillusioned both with his American friend and the teacher he idolizes. Aside from the prestigious prize from the *Free Press*, “Clay” was also accorded First Prize by the Palanca Awards. The prizes however failed to spur on the young talent. The next time he came out with another story was in 1963. The piece titled “A Record of My Passage” won another Palanca award. Its author, however, has not come out with more fiction. Instead, he put out a compilation of essays written while he was editor of *The Sunday Chronicle* in the 1960s. Little Reports brought together what might very well be the precursor of a prose genre that has come in our time to be designated as “creative nonfiction.”

As we have seen in the foregoing, UST had begun to assert itself as a center for new writing, and its notable literary products were three young authors who competed for attention alongside writers turned out by Silliman and UP. Of the three, the flashiest was fictionist Wilfrido D. Nollado whose poetic prose stood apart from the style of his contemporaries. Nollado wielded the English language as though it were his personal invention. “Rice Wine” is his frequently anthologized work in which the distinctive prose was intimately wedded to a sense of history.

In 1970, the US publisher E.P. Dutton published *But for the Lovers*, a novel about the Pacific War and how it physically and spiritually damaged the Philippines. Nollado’s narrative unfolds within the language web of his characteristic prose, liberally sprinkled with puns and verbal play in Tagalog and Spanish. The story revolves around a set of characters who are embodiments of history, legend and popular culture, evoking the country’s past and cultural development: Alma, the young woman symbolic of the “Filipino soul,” and Molave, the unkempt young man who acted as Alma’s guardian, suggestive of the sturdy heroic spirit (tough as *molave* lumber) of the patriots who seek to preserve the national soul.

When Nollado joined the *Philippines Free Press* as a journalist in the late 1960s, he found himself in direct contact with the men and women who make history as bureaucrats, politicians, economists and entertainment moguls. The dense realities of daily life crowded into his fiction and plays. It seemed the characters and events he wrote of cried out to be ad-

mitted into his art. Young writers dazzled by his independence as a creative artist lionized him, and we have the phenomenon of the first Thomasian writer inspiring adulation among beginning and aspiring writers from outside the University.

A walking writing workshop even before the Center for Creative Writing and Studies was founded in 1999, Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta was a constant source of inspiration to the young and aspiring writers inside the UST campus. She was a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters who stayed on in UST as a teacher till her death in 2009, truly a literary institution, who for three terms served as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters. As a poet, her output has been acclaimed for its penetrating account of one Filipino woman's sojourn in Philippine society, an artist's lyric recording of the griefs and joys of moving through life. Her books are notable for their poetic idiom, a seemingly inexhaustible fount of images and sounds that bespeak a sensibility ever fresh and original. *Montage* (1974), *Time Factor* (1984), *Flowing On* (1988) and *Lady Polyester: Poems Past and Present* (1993) contain some of the most outstanding poetry written by the author. *The Ophelia Dimalanta Reader Volume 1 (Selected Poetry)* (2004) assembles what the poet herself considered her enduring works.

The Philippine Poetic (1976) established Dimalanta as a leading proponent of New Criticism, its formalist orientation serving as a guide through the poet's technique and achievement. Dimalanta, at the time of her death, was chair of the influential Manila Critics Circle which annually honored the best books of the year.

A contemporary of Dimalanta in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters was Constante Casabar who initiated in Ilocano fiction a literary reform with his introduction of social realism in the novels that he wrote for the popular weekly magazine *Bannawag*. In his years in UST, Casabar absorbed lessons from Western masters like Hemingway and Steinbeck, who were in vogue then as outstanding realists. In *Dagiti Mariing Iti Parbangon* (available in Tagalog translation as *Silang Nagigising sa Madaling Araw*), he tells about an idealistic young townsman of a mythical town in the countryside of Ilocos with its corrupt government officials, conformist middle-class residents, terrorizing toughies and law-abiding peasants struggling to survive. Readers read into his works the hardships and venalities of con-

temporary life in Ilocos towns, and the powers-that-be who felt alluded to in Casabar's hard-hitting novels made life precarious for the author and his family. In the end, Casabar and his family found themselves emigrating to Canada and then the United States where the novelist eventually died, leaving behind for his readers a heritage of more than 28 novels.

In the 1950s, Rolando S. Tinio was an undergraduate poet writing in *The Varsitarian* imitations of Rabindranath Tagore. After graduating with a Ph.B. Philosophy degree, he took off for the United States and enrolled in Paul Engle's Writing Workshop in the State University of Iowa. It was there that he grew into a Westernized Filipino poet whose aestheticism extended to theater theory, costume design and difficult poetry. Upon his return to the Philippines, he found a job as English instructor at the Ateneo de Manila University.

The Ateneo de Manila Experimental Theater was his first project in drama, for which he did a radical production of the classic *Oedipus Rex*, testing by practice theater theory he had evolved from his studies in Iowa. The result was a stunning production that overwhelmed a few but failed to bring in a general audience. For Tinio, it was the start of a personal artistic search for a stage practice that would suit the conditions of contemporary theater and theater-going in the Philippines. He next went into the production of Tagalog translations of popular modern foreign plays like Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. From there he moved on to the staging of revivals of traditional Filipino dramatic forms: the *zarzuela Paglipas ng Dilim* and the *komedya Prinsipse Baldovino*. In the Martial Law years, he came under the patronage of Imelda Marcos and he was funded by the Ministry of Public Information to run a theater group in the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Teatro Filipino, of which Tinio was director, production designer and translator, made available to young Filipino theater-goers translated productions of modern European plays. After his death, posthumous honor came to Tinio when he was named National Artist for Theater and Literature, an honor that he fully deserved for revolutionizing theater practice in the Philippines.

Aside from his achievement in theater, Tinio also left his mark on Tagalog poetry. Two poetry collections, *Sitsit sa Kuliglig* and *Dunong-dunungan*, document his contribution to literature with his introduction of colloquial idiom and tone to Tagalog poetry, which had been mired in

didacticism and sentimentality as its burden from the past. Indeed, in the person of Rolando S. Tinio, UST has produced a genius of an artist who stands high in the pantheon of Philippine theater and literature.

Federico Licsi Espino came into the literary scene of the Sixties with *In Three Tongues* which offered a young poet's works in English, Spanish and Tagalog. The young author would turn out to be a literary historian, critic, translator and fictionist, modest and unobtrusive in spite of his literary achievements. He brought Filipino readers—teachers, authors and literature students—an awareness of Third World writing through his translations of poems from India, Africa, Japan, Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia in the compilation *Mga Tulang Afro-Asyatiko* (1975). The quality of his literary output was affirmed by the numerous prizes he won from prestigious institutions like the Palanca Awards, the CCP Literary Contest, the Surian ng Wikang Pambansa, the *Philippines Free Press*. Among his notable works are *From Mactan to Mendiola* (1971), *Toreng Bato... Kastilyong Pawid ang Bagwis ng Guniguni* (1967), *Counter-Clockwise, 1965-1969* (1969), and *Hampas sa Diwa, Himas sa Gunita* (1983). *Tambor de Sangre* (1977) was awarded the Premio de Poesia de Ramon de Bastera in Madrid.

In 1963 the landmark anthology *Mga Agos sa Disyerto* came out with short stories by young fictionists previously published only in campus newspapers. "Tata Selo" was a standout among the stories, and it was authored by a Thomasian named Rogelio R. Sicat. The story told about a peasant who killed the abusive landowner under whom he served. Jose Rizal's *El Filibusterismo* provides the pattern for Sicat's narrative in his novel *Dugo sa Bukang-Liwayway*, with Ibarra as the model for the young man who wants to bring changes in his native village. Sicat's Simon is assassinated at the close of the novel, and by this time, the villagers have begun to unite in response to Simon's reformist ideals. *Moses, Moses* is a full-length play with resonances of contemporary political events, wherein the mother of a son being pursued by the law in the person of a corrupt town official chooses to be the executioner of her own son rather than yield him to an executioner with filthy hands. In another play, a writer torn between his duty to his needy family and his desire to pursue his art ends up dead. *Saan Papunta ang Paruparo?* dramatizes the tension in the artist through the symbolism of the butterfly that entices the artist to his doom in an accident. A one-man play, *Tatalon* is Sicat's rendition of a news item about a *jeepney* driver

from an urban poor community who committed suicide. Sicat's play shows the driver debating with himself between suicide and commitment to the cause of workers like him.

Norma O. Miraflor was known to readers as an author of English stories that appeared in the *Philippines Free Press*. In 1970 she pleasantly astounded fellow writers in the ranks of activists when the story "*Sulat Mula sa Pritil*" appeared. It was in the form of a monologue, and the speaker is a high school student complaining about his English teacher and in the process depicting his family and the community in which he lived. In her biographical sketch for an anthology of English stories, she announced that this story was to lead to a trilogy of novels in Filipino. In 1970, "*Sulat*" was followed by "*Kumpisal*." Here, another urban poor boy is "confessing" his gradual awakening to the relevance of the protest movement to the conditions of their life. As in "*Sulat*," Miraflor is able to reproduce in an authentic rendition, through the point of view of her central character, the voice of the youth of the period. This is the fictionist's valuable heritage for the young writers who came after her—the successful rendering in fiction of the speech of the period, leading to a realistic depiction of the temper of the revolutionary times. She migrated to Singapore to take up a journalist's job, leaving the door open to the stylistic contemporization of narration that Jun Cruz Reyes was to pick up and carry to its logical conclusion. Miraflor continued to write in Singapore, producing the novel *Island of Wives* in which she displays her facility in creating characters whose lives she pursues to reveal yet another talent, this time in expert narrativization. Thus far, her activist followers are still waiting for the promised trilogy.

Cirilo F. Bautista, poet and fictionist in English and Filipino, teaches at De La Salle Manila where he set up the Bienvenido Santos Center for Creative Writing. *The Cave and Other Poems* was his first book of poems which appeared in 1968. His use of English for his poetry is put to the crucible with his project of writing an epic on the growth of the Filipino nation. Opening the epic was *The Archipelago* (1970), followed eleven years later by *Telex Moon* (1981). The final book came out in 1999 as *Sunlight on Broken Stones*. The completed epic now comes under the title *The Trilogy of Saint Lazarus* (2001). It was awarded the Centennial Literary Prize in the epic category, an affirmation of Bautista's stature as the leading socially conscious contemporary Filipino poet writing in English.

Bautista has written English translations of the poems of Amado V. Hernandez collected in *Bullets and Roses* (2003). His books of Filipino poems are *Sugat ng Salita* (1985), *Kirot ng Kataga* (1995), *Tinik ng Dila* (2003), and *Latay sa Isipan* (2007). *Galaw ng Asoge* (2004) is his novel in Filipino.

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo was a byline in numerous travel essays which traced the writer's sojourn in foreign countries where husband Antonio Hidalgo served on assignment as a UN official. When the couple settled down in the Philippines, Hidalgo taught English, literature, and creative writing at the University of Philippines, and buckled down to do serious creative writing. *Recuerdo* took shape as an epistolary novel representing letters from a mother to her daughter. The novelty of the project as a narrative is that the letters happened as befitting a literary work conceived in the age of cyberspace on the Internet. The Palanca judges in 1996 were impressed by the creativity of the writer and awarded *Recuerdo* the Grand Prize for the novel.

Hidalgo continued to write prodigiously and has produced another novel and several story collections, notably *Ballad of a Lost Season* (1987), *Tales for a Rainy Night* (1993), *Where Only the Moon Rages* (1994), and *Catch a Falling Star* (1999). The former director of the UST Publishing House, Hidalgo is now head of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies.

UST has produced literary criticism that has impacted on the field in the work of J. Neil Garcia. *Philippine Gay Culture* (1996) is Garcia's original contribution to an academic area that has skittishly avoided going too deep on the subject of homoerotic sex. His book now stands as the standard text on homosexuality as it has been manifested in Philippine writing, and as the authority on the parameters by which studies on poetry and fiction dealing with gay relationships must deal with. An extended essay on Federico Licsi Espino's story "Lumpen" encompasses the various implications of Garcia's criticism as it has deepened since 1996.

Aside from criticism, Garcia has been writing poetry and his verse has been collected in several volumes of which *Closet Quivers* (1992) is the first. His poetry, marked by notable sensitivity to the nuances of language, enmeshes the reader in the cultural repercussions of his themes.

It is significant to note that literary production in the University, in the beginning, was an offshoot of sheer talent and the personal drive of its students. No special courses were offered for the cultivation of creative talent, there was only a wide-awake consciousness in the students that events and personalities were in the process of shaping a nation, and there was a need to arrest this in language: to remember in some future, or to remind a loved one of events shared in the prime of their lives, or to express rage or joy that had to be captured in writing for no reason at all. In this regard, there were dedicated passionate mentors who rubbed off on their students the love of language and the intense respect for masters of literary craft. Such were the likes of Paz Latorena, Josephine Bass-Serrano, Carolina Garcia, Erlinda Francia-Rustia, Jose Hernandez, Jose Villa Panganiban, and many others who labored in the groves of academe and awakened in their students the urgency of carrying out the task of making literature light one's way through life.

The quiet labor of the iconic UST teachers paid off. The names of Abadilla, Edroza, Sionil Jose, Tuvera, Nollo, Casabar, Dimalanta, Sicat, Bautista, Miraflor, Hidalgo and Garcia constitute a glittering roster that can hang side by side with the names of writers produced by Silliman and UP. The University of Santo Tomas at 400 can step forward as a writing center to claim an honored place in Philippine literature.

