

Literature and Religion

Ophelia A. Dimalanta

I start with the idea that all literature, and I mean, authentic literature, literature that matters, literature worthy of its name... is essentially related to religion. It is finally a quest for the meaning and justification of life and is always an attempt to see things in a different light. It ultimately raises objective reality to a higher level, a higher order of life. This attempt is the very source of the writer's faith sustaining his being, his art.

This brings us to the word transcendence. Transcendence is in fact a romantic strain in poetry, in Filipino poetry, an oriental yearning for the unseen world. The Filipino romantic, albeit no mystic, operates as some kind of mystic where supreme realities dawn upon the poet briefly, in moments of "heightened consciousness" or "intersections, of the temporal and the eternal."

A Scottish poet Kenneth White describes nature poems as communication between man and the cosmos. And so, whatever its programmes, its preoccupations, proclivities, immediate concerns, the best poetry relates the outer world to the inner world which moves all realities into a beautiful schema. The Filipino poet does not write outright religious poetry but studying his *entire* work, one recognizes a significant measure of spirituality which motivates the more urgent ultimacies of his art – best expressed by Yves Bonnefoy's "the subject matter of poetry begins with a flea and ends with God."

I repeat, this faith sustains the art of all poets.

This faith endows the writer with values, the right values, and this inevitably leads us to the issue of morality in literature, morality being an issue we cannot separate from religion, and for that matter, literature.

Any statement on literature must be in a way axiological since it involves ethics even in the most indirect way. Axiology after all is value theory centrally shared by both ethics and aesthetics. Even while morality is not literature and literature has its own autonomous standards, it is never totally unrelated to morality or ethics.

This does not mean that literature, poetry particularly, is meant to preach morality; otherwise it ends up being didactic, pietistic, proselytizing — pejorative terms in literature. Literature, in the noblest sense, most significantly upholds basic truths about the individual and about life, a humanistic belief in the person as rational and basically as feeling, and as spiritual being.

Dipping into one's spiritual life does not mean turning away from the real world. It simply means opening up to a fuller experience of the world and profiting from both the pleasure and the pain. Literature's focusing inward does not mean indulging the pain but rather seeking out something like sanity, a moment's serenity recalling forgotten courage. Creativity and contemplation are germane to literature, and creative contemplation nudges us into making this inner dip into our vaunted spirituality.

Any person working under the pressure of a modern organization, corporate world, academe, is making his way through the world, a world that seems to be having less room for spirituality. Spirituality, I repeat, is the person's inner core. It is made of the stuff from which flow the motivations, inspirations, and commitments that make him live and decide in a particular way. Our artistic materials are derived from these experiences and options in life, as well as our own experience of God, which is allowed to act in us even in a simple poem. Every literary piece is a celebration of life with all its pains (better pain than paralysis) and no matter how seemingly pessimistic, it expresses all the dynamic contortions of living, an impalement of a given moment, a part of life's scheme in the Divine Blueprint — a recognition of kinship with that tree, that flower, that bird, that stream, all of God's creations. The very release of creative energy and new insights is a gesture of refocusing old and staid definitions of spirituality lest they be fixed only in one direction, parochial, sanctimonious.

Spirituality can even lead to, yes (hold your breath now) eroticism, or is it the other way round?

Perhaps, one may argue, modern writers have oftentimes given the readers a sense of chaos rather than order, guilt, rather than well-being. And these are admittedly quite valid realistic portrayals of the darker but not less real aspects of life. Where, then, is the spirituality here?

This tendency of contemporary writers may be traced to the growth of the questioning spirit resulting from a confusion of values and ideologies: a wavering of faith, corrosion of old idealisms, preoccupation with man's littleness in a world gone askew.

Yet, somehow, looking closely, we discover that even the most despondent writers have wrenched from a seemingly hostile universe some sense, some abiding dream, even courage that outlives death simply because he took time out to write about this despondency and simply because he writes about man, and man is essentially a hoping, aspiring creature deep inside.

Whatever this vague or elusive thing writers pin their hopes on, the very act of writing attests to the existence of something in life which points obliquely or otherwise to some greater good, making of life something more than mere bleak prelude to death.

A superficial theology may confine the concept of God to the thunder, the mountains, the heavenly bodies, nature, but a deeper theology finds God right in the core of human needs.

Literature may itself be religion allowed to drift along without resorting to dogmas, religion without metaphysical illusion, precisely what this troublous world needs where even illusions disillusion. Without recourse to sentimental religiosities, literature has given us a sense of the will liberated, and if frustrated, eventually fulfilled through a kind of enlightenment at the end, a device which is aesthetic and literary as well. In literature, theology is not explicated or explained. It is rendered!

You have to be a good literary writer to express this intense faith in man, one of the highest manifestations of spirituality. Anton Chekhov said: "there is no such thing as a bad person, only an unhappy one and deserving our sympathy."

So much profound spirituality may in fact be found in the works of the Russian masters, particularly Dostoevsky who plumbed the depths of

the soul with such fire and intensity.

Religion in literature, explicit or implied, is in essence a search for authenticity in a world of phoney, alienation of all kinds, personal, social, and cosmic. Salinger for instance in *Catcher in the Rye* gives us a peek into adolescent psychology, focusing on modern day youth confused by different modern fads, readings, movies which encourage private manias, chimeras mistaken for realities.

Modern youth has started to ask questions and even distrust abstract dogmatism, empty theological theorizings. The young are bound to ask, "Tell us why, for all the prayers mouthed, dogmas memorized, there remain this intense fever in our groins, this appalling need in our souls, this heaviness in our hearts? Literature must attempt to offer even temporary solutions. The abstractions in Theology must be supported by the concrete rendering of reality that will try to answer disturbing questions. The German poet Rilke said quite aptly: "It is not the answers that show us the way but the sad questions!"

Not even Literature can give the answers. Literature's access to life is deeper than what reason alone can offer, for life is rendered understandable through its objectifications, in the realm of objects seen, sensed, felt, expressed through the magic of words, and relationships are grasped in the presentness of lived experience.

What about evil made attractive in Literature? A world steeped in evil is a realistic Christian concept. The wisening process that is a result of actual active participation in evil is specifically tragic in the sense not so much of falling but of rising every time one falls! In classical tragedies, the connection between the drama and religion is more pronounced. Every dramatic oeuvre was a religious ritual, specially manifested in the spiritual upliftment which was part of the tragic pleasure gained at the end. The very portrayal of evil gives a literary work a metaphysical and universal slant.

How about the writings of Existentialists like Albert Camus and his despairing cry against the plague that plagues mankind? Again and again, in Camus, we read about the healing powers of love, compassion, brotherhood.

If despair prompts writing, then fraternity is established. Love is born. A Literature of Despair according to Camus is a contradiction in

terms. Camus like all the rest of the Existentialists may well be called an unavowed Christian writer.

In the writer's portrayal of evil, he consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly hankers for a better world, and is drawn towards an invisible order of things, a supernaturalism implied or explicit in Literature but inevitably there. Closer to home, Nick Joaquin portrays sinners and sin quite compellingly, considering the power of his language. Like Mauriac and Graham Greene, he believes that there are times one has to go to hell to find God. Mauriac himself said: the more a person consorts with the devil, the more he is made more interesting to the writer's purpose, the more dramatic the enactment of his fall and subsequent redemption.

We tend to distinguish among literature that is openly religious, literature indirectly religious and literature that is obviously irreligious. These distinctions disappear in the light of common efforts to dramatize the dilemma of modern man, and of course the faith that sustains him, whether he admits it or not.

In poetry and in fiction, the writer usually alludes to epiphanies or moments of illumination which interrupt and make significant the everyday flow of time. Here, one enters a privileged moment where he intuitively grasps a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons. This is what you find in all literary pieces of great importance. The "epiphany" or appearance which speaks of the arrival of Christ, occupies a vital place in the New Testament.

How about eroticism in poetry? Quoting the great Nobel Prize winner, poet Czeslaw Milosz: "Eros is sexual love but not only such, because it is an intermediary between gods and human beings." In the best sense then, this kind of love is a true motoric desire or force of creativity in art and even science. It may even be applied to the relationship between a poet and generations of readers to come, and becomes the motivation to perfect one's art without hope of being rewarded by contemporaries, the magnanimity of offering a gift to posterity. And this could take the form of all kinds of love poems and all kinds of love, sensuous or outrightly spiritual.

In conclusion, the writer knows better than to take the stance of a mystic. He does not lull the readers by ignoring injustice, violence, suf-

fering, for by doing so, he does not cure, but forget or ignore and thus, condone.

And despite the seeming incoherences and unorthodoxies of some contemporary writers, literature and life, as well as literature and religion are inevitably intimately bound.

Touching man, touching life, the writer ultimately, significantly touches God.