

Introduction

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Every seat in the room was taken. Some people had made themselves comfortable on the floor. The exchange between the panelists and the audience was lively. This was the panel discussion on the novel during the Philippine Literary Festival (sponsored by National Bookstore and Raffles Hotel) in August 2015, and the size of the audience surprised me. I didn't think the novel would be one of the more popular topics.

The most interesting question came at the very end. The moderator had announced that she would take just one more question. And this young woman had literally leapt to her feet – she had been sitting quietly on the floor, in front, a little to our right. Now she looked determined to have her say.

She introduced herself as a Wattpad Pad writer, adding that some of her books had been converted into print books and were being sold in National Bookstore. She did not say whether any of them had been made into films or *“teleserye.”* Then she asked her question: “How literary is literary?”

At first my fellow-panelists and I weren't quite sure what her question meant. The young lady tried to explain, stumbling a bit on her words, obviously a little nervous. “We have a lot of readers,” she gushed. “A lot, really! But... we would like to become literary... like you... but how literary is literary?”

We tried to answer the question. But at some point, it occurred to me that maybe we were not addressing what she was really asking. From her halting attempts at an explanation, I thought that what she was telling

us was that she – and maybe some other Wattpad writers – were aware that, though popular, their writing was not regarded as quite on the level of what she was referring to as “literary writing,” that they weren’t... *respected* perhaps? And that what she really wanted from us was advice on how they could get there.

I said so to her, and she nodded, looking relieved. “We want... someday... to write like you, Ma’am and Sirs,” she said earnestly.

“I’ll give you a straightforward answer,” I said. And then, I surprised myself by saying something I didn’t know was what I actually felt. I knew about Wattpad, of course, but I had never given it much thought. In my mind Wattpad fiction was on the level of the old radio soap operas, or the paperback romances, part of “commercial culture.”

But what I said to the young woman was this: “I think you’re doing good. You’re getting more Filipinos to read – and write – than ever before. And now you’re telling me that you want to become better writers. That too is a good thing. But I don’t think you should make it your goal to write *like us*. We’re senior citizens. You don’t really want to sound like us, do you? In fact, I don’t think you could even if you tried. We belong to different worlds practically.”

She looked a little puzzled. I told her that I thought she and her friends should focus on taking the next step. And that would mean studying the writers who – though they might be a little older than themselves – are still young enough to be part of their generation. I mentioned a few names: Vlad Gonzalez of UP, Eros Atalia and Joselito Delos Reyes of UST; Ferdinand Jarin of the Philippine Normal University. The young woman nodded again, vigorously. She did know them, she said.

“Did you know that they too are academics, like the three of us here?” I asked. “But they are writing books that are very different from what we write. And they’re good too. Vlad was published by Miflores, the small publishing house which made that kind of writing its niche – books by young writers, which are funny, and fun, but also intelligent and well-written. Eros, Joey and Ferdie have been published by Visprint, which has taken over from where Miflores left off.”

The young woman was smiling now.

“And there are the writers who are a little older, but are still in your general neighborhood,” I continued, “like Lourde de Veyra, Chris

Martinez, Rica Bolipata-Santos... Chris was published by Milflores. Rica was published by both Milflores *and* the University of the Philippines Press, an academic publishing house. And Lourd has been published by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, another academic publisher. They may not have as many readers as you and other Wattpad writers have, but they certainly have many more than *we* have. And they enjoy the respect of their students and their colleagues. So, take the next step by going in their direction. Someday you may become as good as they are. Or you might become better. And then you'll take the next step, going in a direction you cannot yet know at this time."

The young woman looked satisfied. I had given her an answer that had surprised her, but that made sense. What she didn't know was that it had surprised me more than it had her.

That evening, on my way home from the Raffles, I thought to myself: but if that's really what I think – if I wasn't just playing to the galleries – why don't I write books like theirs?

The obvious answer is that I couldn't even if I wanted to. I write in the only way I know how. And, though I might encourage – and even enjoy – an entirely different sort of writing in my students and my young colleagues, I remain committed to writing for, and producing, literary journals like *Tomás*, which are dedicated to the kind of literature which, though its audience might be small, serves its own purpose.

Writers of all generations have tried to define that purpose. But there are periods in our history when it becomes startlingly clear. The period we live in today, in this country, is one of them – one of those periods when events, both natural and man-made, conspire to drain one of all hope that better times lie ahead. A looming national election used to bring on optimism, no matter how tentative: change seemed possible.

Not this time.

In *Sonoran Desert Summer*, John Alcock, professor of Zoology at Arizona State University, describes June in the desert as "the month of almost no hope" for all living creatures, with the temperature at 102 degrees, rainfall at two-tenths of an inch, and "a wind that has removed almost every hint of moisture from the desert world."

"It is a time for hanging on," he writes, "enduring, letting the days pass."

But, suddenly... “from the boulders on the still shaded lower slope of Usery Mountain comes a song, the clear, descending trill of a canyon wren. Loud, defiant and encouraging, it announces a survivor. A blur of chestnut brown and white, the wren bounds from rock to rock, at perfect ease in its home in the desert.”

Sometimes I think that this might be the reason we do it. For writers in a journal like this one, this is their song, “defiant and encouraging.”

Ours is a rich harvest this term. In the succeeding pages, the reader will hear the voices of both our most distinguished writers/scholars, as well as emergent voices. Since *Tomás* is the official literary journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, and the Center’s mandate includes both providing a support group for established writers as well as nurturing of young writers, both are assured of space here.

Breaking with usual practice we have chosen to open this issue with Criticism. We wish to highlight the fact that literary scholars and critics are also a part of the Center, that our pages are open to literary commentary, or commentary on the arts, or on culture.

At the top of the list are National Artist Virgilio Almario and University Professor Emeritus Gémino H. Abad, who are both poets and critics.

Almario’s essay “*Ang Katotohanan at Kabutihan ng ‘Kagandahan’*” opens with a discussion of the term “*Kagandahan*” as it is used in everyday speech, popular culture, and academic discussions. It then focuses on the *awit*, *korido* and *komedya*, literary forms neglected by our own critics. The neglect, Almario argues, might be traced to a reliance on Western standards of what is aesthetically pleasing. He concludes his thoughtful and incisive essay by urging diligent research and analysis of such works, as well as of terms like “*gayak*” and “*payak*,” which may provide valuable insights which will enrich our understanding of our culture and our identity as a people.

Abad’s essay, “Reading as a Liberating Art,” seeks to explain how poetry works and why it humanizes. “... Of all studies that humanize, it humanizes best,” he writes, “because it cultivates the life of feeling and the imagination.” The essay, which exhibits the lucidity and brilliance – not to mention the lyrical style – which characterize both his poetry and his scholarship, touches on some of the author’s favorite themes: the complex

process of reading, the “duplicitous” nature of literature, language as the means by which literature is “invented.”

The essay by Philippine Women’s University President Jose Francisco Benitez was originally delivered as a keynote lecture during an international literature conference on “Text and the City” (which opened in UST). It explores the concept of the city as text and a text as city. The city, according to Benitez, “is woven from multiple and diverse strands that form patterns with a grammar and a syntax, with rules that dictate the parameters of social practices... It is a particular type of sedimentation of social relations, a particular type of spatialization of modes of social reproduction... The city is also a text in a third sense, in the sense of a text’s intertextuality and open-endedness. As sites of social relations and practices, cities are never alone, never absolutely autonomous.” As illustrations, his provocative discussion takes up the short story by Macario Pineda, “Kasalan sa Malaking Bahay” and the film *Tirador* by Brillante Mendoza.

“*Tagalog-Waray Connection: ang Tugma at Sukat ng Siday*” by Jerry B. Gracio is an important contribution to the existing body of critical work on our national poetics. Taking off from the Talaang Ginto: Gawad Surian sa Tula, one of the oldest, and most prestigious literary awards in the country, it discusses the fraught issues of poetry in Tagalog as distinct from poetry in Filipino, and the privileging of Tagalog-centric aesthetic standards. Gracio asserts that it is time to respect variety – in particular in the poetry by writers from the regions – arguing that an open attitude can only benefit the development of the Filipino language.

“Speculations for the Soul: Shades of the Catholic Imagination in Carlomar A. Daoana’s *Clairvoyance*” by the young scholar Ma. Ailil B. Alvarez’s is a bit of a rarity. It is one of very few commentaries, in the body of existing literary criticism in English, which focus on the Catholic imagination. This rarity must necessarily strike one as unusual, considering the clear predominance of Catholicism over other religions in the country. Alvarez’s essay seeks to tease out the Catholic strands of thought in Daoana’s poems, utilizing insights drawn from several Catholic literary and cultural scholars, and doing so with both astuteness and sensitivity.

We are equally elated by the short fiction in this issue. “Winter Butterfly” is by Ninotchka Rosca, Filipino-American novelist and activist, best known locally for her novels *State of War* and *Twice Blessed* (both

published by Norton with local editions published by Anvil). This new story is about a day in the life of a social worker, haunted by her beautiful brother who died at sea fifteen years earlier, as she moves about the city's grey streets, trying to learn to handle her clients "with detached compassion." It is an exquisite story, clearly the work of an artist at the peak of her powers. A line from the story itself seems to describe it best: "Exact and precise, needing no elaboration."

Augusto Antonio Aguila's "A Condition of Worship" is the soliloquy of an obsessed man, a forty-year-old academic trapped in a hopeless passion for a young volleyball player. The situation is made more sharply ironic and more deeply humiliating by the protagonist's unrelenting awareness that this is not a new story: it is Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice," however it might differ in some of its details, a pathetic tale that he has taught in many of his own classes. In the words of one reviewer: "The story's competent and contemporary voice is a welcome addition to Filipino prose and deserves recognition."

The poets – once referred to by Alfred A. Yuson as "literature's cavalry" – are led by Yuson himself. Yuson writes in practically all the literary genres, and is so good at each one, that one is hard put to choose which of them he is best at. There are those who are firm in their conviction that it is as poet that he is most triumphant. The new suite of poems included here is a good argument for their position. The poems sound several notes, from the tender, almost wistful "Dream of the Next Half (for D.)," to the despairing "What Else But Such," and the ironic "Guitar at Sea," with a few others in between. This is poetry doing what Yuson did with prose in his first novel, *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Cafe*.

Given the dearth of translations of literary works in any of the languages used by Filipinos, Ralph Semino Galan's suite of poems – which consists of what he describes as "*malayang salin*," (free translations) of the work of five of our most widely admired and respected women poets in English – is a valuable contribution. One reviewer has expressed satisfaction at Galan's faithful and effective rendering of both the ideas and emotions from the original poems. Another reviewer has lauded its efforts at capturing the cadence of the original poems. And still another has suggested that one value of translation work like this is that it calls attention to techniques used by poets working in English, which will benefit poets who work in other languages.

Ned Parfan's is a new voice in Philippine literature in English, and it is a brave voice. In "From *Tilt Me Till I Bend*," it takes on different personae – male, female and gay; tests different forms; slips into different moods. One reviewer particularly praised its "spare and confident tone." Another one singled out "the stillness at the heart of each poem, a stillness that enables one to hear the anguished cry."

Vijae Alquisola's "*Paglasa sa Pansamantala*" consists of short, engagingly accessible poems, which, while using food and cooking as metaphors, and apparently dealing with the everyday and the mundane, actually take on current issues like the K-12 scheme, the government's ineptitude, gender repression. One reviewer sums it up succinctly: "Madulas ang wika, kontemporanyo ang dating, maliwanag ang talinhaga."

Filipino-American poet Deedle Rodriguez-Tomlinson closes our poetry section with "Manila, 1970's and Other Poems." Quiet and unpretentious, employing the rhythms of everyday speech, these deceptively simple poems initially seem to be nostalgic portraits of seasons and places left behind. But a closer reading reveals them to have their own urgency, and darkness, and pain.

Our nonfiction section opens with a most unusual memoir by the Rev. Father Angel Aparicio, O.P., perhaps the first contribution by a Dominican priest to our journal, since its founding 16 years ago by the late Ophelia Alcantara-Dimalanta. Though short, his memoir covers an entire lifetime, even as it focuses only on what the writer refers to as "signposts." Candid and unsentimental, the narrative is the more touching for its being so restrained. And, perhaps when words fail him, or perhaps when he is tempted to loosen the tight reins holding the emotion in, the writer allows other writers to speak for him: Juan Ramon Jimenez, T.S. Eliot, St. Paul, St. Therese of Lisieux... And that too, serves the story well.

Filipino-American writer Gina Apostol has published 3 novels. Her latest, *Gun Dealer's Daughter*, and an earlier one, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* were first published by Norton, but have Philippine editions (Anvil). Her reflections on the writing of her latest novel, winner of the PEN/Open Book Award and shortlisted for the William Saroyan International Prize, should be interesting and useful to beginning novelists and critics alike, given the dearth of this sort of writing by Filipinos based in the country.

OFW narratives have become so ubiquitous, that they set off alarm bells in most readers' minds from the very first paragraphs. But in "*Aestemasu: Japan Japan Sagot sa Kahirapan*," Romulo B. Baquiran, Jr. once again combines comedy and pathos, without letting go of the light touch, which is rapidly becoming his signature mode. While depicting the familiar problems that confront overseas Filipino workers, he does so "sa paraang magaan at kuwela," in the words of one reviewer. This is in large part due to the self-deprecatory tone adopted by his narrator, even as he reveals the bewilderment, amazement, hesitations, and contradictions experienced by all who navigate the slippery slopes of a foreign culture.

"Claiming Our Inheritance" by Jhoanna Cruz and "Someday" by Arnie Quibranza Mejia deal with the same subject from two different perspectives: that of a woman with children and a new partner, and that of a single man. They are similar in that the protagonists are at risk. There is a certain fragility, a certain precariousness about their chosen lifestyles. One is trying to build a safe, loving home for her children, while swimming upstream, so to speak. The other is afraid to endanger his hard-won freedom and peace of mind by reconnecting with his brother.

"*Tangke*" is a simple coming-of-age story, made more poignant, not just by the boy-protagonist's having to endure both poverty and the bullying of his peers, but also by his ability to escape this trap through his optimism. In effect, he makes up for the literal smallness of his body, and the limitations of his options, with the height of his dreams. Ferdinand Jarin's is one of the exciting new voices in our literary scene.

We close this issue with another story of childhood – though this tale is much gentler – told by a writer familiar to readers of Philippine non-fiction, particularly travel writing. Alice Sun-Cua revisits her Iloilo childhood home in "The Studio at 57 Guanco Street." With a practiced hand, she recreates the scene in loving detail, embracing both the sweetness and the sadness which inevitably accompany such reminiscing, as well as the realization that she has never really left home.

Even as *Tomás 5* goes to press, the reports from the peer reviewers of *Tomás 6* have come in, so pre-production has commenced.

To work, then.

Note: We are now accepting contributions for Tomás 7, from all writers, including non-Thomasians and non-Filipinos. Contributions may be in English or Filipino: fiction (short stories or novel excerpts), poetry, creative nonfiction (essays, memoir, profiles, travel writing, literary journalism, journal excerpts, etc.), drama (1-act plays or short film scripts), graphic fiction, comic strips, photographic essays, and experimental work which may not fit into any of the above. Please submit both hard and soft files of your manuscript. These and soft copies (CD or USB) may be mailed or delivered to the UST Center for Creative Writing & Literary Studies, Ground Floor, Miguel de Benavides Bldng.; the soft copy may also be emailed to ccwls-tomas@mun.edu.ph)