Reading as a Liberating Art

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In sum: our poet in whatever language lives and breathes poetry at the zenith of excellent writing, "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing." (Hopkins: 73)

Our poet because the subject of his poems is *our* consciousness, *our* experience, in our own "scene so fair," for which he has forged a language *from* English.

In whatever language: Spanish, English, Tagalog, Cebuano, whatever, because of the nature of the creative process, "that craft or sullen art."

First, the ground of language – the soil of thought and feeling – is broken. The Latin word *versus* means "furrows"; thus, *verses* signals the work of cultivation. For the writer, no historical language is a *given*; it is *forged,* in the triple sense of that word: "to bring into being; to make, mime, or simulate; to forge ahead, to advance."

The writer then *translates* his perceptions of reality, his consciousness of it *as imagined*, into language. The word "translate" is from Latin *transferre, translatus,* "to carry or ferry across."

So, the writer ferries across the void of language his own soul's freight without hurt or injury to mind's import and aim – *the void of language* because the meanings of our words arise, *not so much* from the "differential play" among the words as from *lives lived as imagined*.

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* Revised as drawn from "English Literature Teaching in the Philippines: Problems and Prospects," CETA Journal, vol. 5, no. 1, 1988: 1-6.

Thus, it is only from his own way with language, his craft and cunning with language, that we recognize the poet – *in whatever language*.

One need only read close and imagine well.

Reading as a Liberating Art

You might, at the outset, ask: Why read literature (for on that I focus) and study it at all? The short answer is: of all studies, it humanizes; among all things that humanize, it humanizes best because it *cultivates the life of feeling and imagination.*

When you examine a day in your life -- a day traveling to Sagada or a day shopping -- you quickly discover that it has vanished; it is the same as yesterday or the other day; it does not seem to have much reality or meaning, and yet, you had lived through it. The reason is that it has no words, or its words are those in daily use, for ready communication and commerce.

But when you read literature -- read it so as to produce it -- then you discover life, the very living of it; it becomes so real, so alive, in the mind's imagination: that vista of rice terraces, that monstrous traffic on EDSA. And the reason is: now that trek has all the words -- the words in daily use, or words found anew or freshened in their relationship and play with other words; in any case, words well chosen and ordered for perceptive expression; indeed, communication still, but beyond that, it may even reach a certain level as spiritual basis for community.

Spiritual? -- why, yes, for it soothes our hunger for our own reality, and tempts us to aspire for that nobility which our daily lives miss. Such is the value and power of (excellent) literature; it is what makes the reading and teaching of it unique: we have a personal stake in it.

Nobility? One might perhaps read literature the way one is moved to prayer and is moved by it. Prayer proceeds from a condition of helplessness; we do not pray when we are convinced of our ability and power. When we read a novel or poem, we are most moved when we are helpless before its beauty and power: we are not convinced we have got it whole for, rather, it has got us. If we have got it, we read no further, we produce no literature. The effect of literature is like the effect of *Our Father* when we realize it can only be the prayer of a very courageous and unselfish man:

for its words mean *Thy will be done*, which discounts our will, and its words beg forgiveness *as we forgive*, which we are often not quite inclined to do.

The act of reading, essentially work of imagination, is an act of civilization, of humanization. The finest symbol of civilization is the figure of a man reading a book. In that act, he gathers the world's best minds, and he is connected, in his isolation, to all humanity. In the rout and routine of day-to-day living, one has to learn the discipline of solitude, the conquest of distraction. The reader is not a passive consumer of texts; he is an active producer of meaning. His solitary act makes itself conscious of its own participation in the construction of the text; it is a rite of passage from sensitivity to a given weave of words to originality of thinking. The poet creates the poem; the reader produces its text. The poem has many possible texts.

The Matter of Our Reading

I would stress *our* because there are always other possible readings or interpretations, and because *our* is often an unexamined tyranny, a collective sensibility, as it were, posing as obvious and definitive.

Any reading is *a* reading; it grounds itself in the very essence of language's usage -- the differential play of meaning. Within a given linguistic system, "tree" has no meaning except in differential relation to other meanings in *plant, bush, shrub, grass*, etc. Is bamboo tree or grass? is banana plant or bush? Within a poem, "tree" has no meaning except in differential relation to other meanings in the poem's word-weave, and to "tree" in other forms of discourse like science, religion, folk mythology, psychology of dreams, etc.

Thus, in reading a poem, for instance, it is often liberating to read *consciously:* to make oneself aware of the process of reading as one reads (what might Tadena have in mind by that word "stave" in his poem, "This Side of Perishing"? [Tadena: 30] or can I picture to mind's eye Frost's "honeysuckle" in his poem, "To Earthward" [Frost: 226-7]). *As one reads*: that is, as one actively produces a possible text of the poem (a paraphrase, if you will), as one actively produces a *con-text* by which to grasp the poem's meaningfulness. That *con-text* is what goes with the poem's word-weave and so, reads it by that reading lamp. One makes oneself aware of the very process of the *construction of meaning* at the time of reading; one need not be over-anxious

about the poet's own meaning -- his is *one* reading or interpretation of an experience *as imagined;* besides, in the author's absence, *his* reading may be subject to fruitless wrangling. The reader is free, but that freedom implies a scrupulous care and responsibility: he must make himself aware of the meanings that he secretes as he reads. The way he reads *reads him*, too: it shows his subjectivity, his own consciousness of a self that is often wordless; it shows his ideology, the way he thinks and feels and so, lives in those concrete and real relations with other people in his own milieu.

Perhaps we should stress this: at the moment of reading, what we are or have become necessarily supports or justifies our reading. Our reading then even gives us a handle to examine ourselves. Our own subjectivity (our hidden and elusive self) is part of the *con-text* which makes possible our reading. Our own feeling, for example, is part of the poem's meaning in our reading of it; our own knowledge is certainly part of what or who we are; this knowledge includes other works (texts) we have read, which then may enter into, or influence, our reading. The poem's meaning -- its "established" (granted) historical-cultural meaning -- may have an independent status of sort, but it is our own reading of it that matters to us. *Our reading is our matter*.

Being aware of the peril and the delight over the play of meaning that the poem releases, your reading becomes one as best as you can arrive at. This awareness liberates us from our anxiety over our limitations even as it also liberates the poem because we open it and ourselves to other possibilities of meaningfulness. In this way, our reading may become slightly more than *just* another reading.

That Differential Play of Meaning

In most pieces of writing, the differential play of meaning that constitutes language is only more or less suppressed. Science and law, for example, as specific forms of discourse, achieve a stability of interpretation preordained by their specific ends or purposes; they are forms of knowledge which are more or less stable or guaranteed. We distinguish murder, homicide, manslaughter, etc. with their corresponding forms of penalty. Yet there are loopholes and ambiguities in the realities created by law; as the cliche goes, the finer the net, the more holes. The court's decision arrests the play of lawyers.

But other pieces of writing (in poetry as a generic term) foreground the play of language. They not only foreclose it, they incite it. To the extent that the poem's imaginative energy is the play of its words, it can free itself from the natural, historical language that grounds it -- free itself from both the historical-cultural milieu and the contemporary usage of that language; it opens itself up to other possible readings that free it from its original *con-text,* and as well, its present readers (we, now, aren't the only possible readers).

The poem, then, is capable of releasing the play of language; the reader, too, as he reads is released into that play. The poem (not all) harnesses that play, valorizes it. Our reading, now, is only *a* stability of meaning, a temporary arrest of the play. Our reading is our equilibrium. Our consciousness of self, our subjectivity, achieves a kind of poise, a settlement with its own discourse; and our ideology or way of thinking maintains in our reading a peace and order among our words.

We usually think that there is only a certain range of possible meanings for a given poem that we can pretty nearly exhaust; yet this range, in fact, should alert us to the ever-present possibility that the words the poem *contains* -- holds and controls -- may secrete other grounds for other integrations of the poem's meaningfulness. There may always be more than meets "the considering eye."** It is only our reading now that is limited. The poem itself stays open to other readings; we can do no less but remain open.

The best reading is that which sees clearly its limitations, that which can criticize its own privileged standpoint. As I've often remarked, "criticism" is from Greek *krinein*: "to divide (distinguish or discriminate) and to judge," which relates to English "crisis." A crisis occurs when one's own "theoria" or standpoint (hidden, unexamined assumptions) is brought into the open and interrogated.

Literature as the Art of Letters

The most fundamental fact about literature is that it is the art of letters. Art implies skill from practice and imagination. The literary product

** I adopt the title of Manuel A. Viray's poem in ME: 225-6.

is an artifice: an artifact, an invention, from the materials of language and human experience. The *matter* of literature is language, its *subject* a human experience. By this *subject-matter*, a new reality is created -- yes, of course, a *fictive* reality. This new reality is sponsored by language; although it is rooted in human experience *as imagined*, it is yet itself a new experience: as the word *experience* (from Greek *experiri*) suggests, a testing, a trial, a judgment of reality.

Because of this *duplex nature* of literature -- or *duplicitous*, if you will -- it is crucial that one is sensitive to the play of language and is himself alive as a human being, alive at all points of contact with reality by which our humanity is always being realized.

Let us focus on language whose usage is the fundamental mechanism by which our human reality is composed or constructed. It is the same mechanism -- but consciously, efficiently operated -- by which literature is *invented (found within language)*. Literature, therefore, is the deepest and highest expression of the reality that our use of language establishes.

There is *a* language that poetry creates for itself from a given natural language. That language that poetry re-invents *matters* it. It is different from other uses of the same natural language which make possible *other forms* of discourse. The poet, for example, may not be interested in the *communication* of meaning, but its *production*; he deals with language not so much as a *vehicle* of meaning as its *generator*. The poems of Carlos Angeles are *in* English; that is their natural medium. But they are also poems *of* Carlos Angeles *from* English; they are, as it were, translations. As I've often remarked, to *trans-late* (from Latin *trans-ferre)* is "to bear across": that is, the poet bears his poems across words recognizably English. But to bear is not only to endure or carry one's burden; it is also to bear fruit. *Across* is crucial in that work of *trans-lation* that is the poet's special calling: for there are mind's or heart's crossings which no language can negotiate unless poetry re-invents it by harnessing the internal, evocative play of meaning which constitutes it. "Crossing," says Cirilo Bautista, "the foggy fjords of the skull"; or Alfred A. Yuson: "why do I bleed so / from such sharp points of dreams?"***

*** Bautista, "Addressed to Himself," 1968, NC: 448-9; Yuson, "Dream of Knives," 1983, HS: 103.

We create the realities that we prefer: for instance, democracy over communism, as manifest in our laws and institutions. Or, we create the realities that are mysteriously given us to perceive (even as Rilke or Yves Bonnefoy does). Often, though, we perceive only what our words permit us to see, for our words already secrete a way of looking, a habit of perception, a mode of feeling. To see beyond our words is to enter into *their* constructs of reality and *criticize* their inscapes. To see beyond may well be to see finally the frailty of our human reality, the nakedness of our creaturehood.

Simply to illustrate the mechanism by which our words construct our reality, take the words *brother, sister* in English and *kapatid* in Tagalog. The English rests on sexual/biological differentiation. The way of looking and feeling inscribed in -- literally, *written into* -- the word *kapatid* rests upon another ground where the same reality is differently perceived. For *ka-patid* is "fellow-cut," or *ka-putol* (*utol),* that is, cut from the same umbilical cord, sharing the same placenta.

A poet may of course employ more often his community's language, its own speaking; he will affirm the communal wisdom, its way of looking and feeling that has sustained the community. He is, let us say without denigration, the conservative poet, and language for him is its daily usage for conversation and commerce. Such poetry depends quite simply on the language of its time and place, it does not seek to criticize and transform it. The burden and glory of such poetry is its sense; its subject or theme is all or almost all. There is no fruit of new seeing, only a fresh renewal of established ways of seeing and feeling. There is only writing that clearly reads itself because the words only propagate a way of looking and feeling that already inheres in the words themselves in their interplay. We are not of course saying that such poetry is so because it often employs only simple, ordinary vocabulary; in fact, the poem that so employs it may also be the most difficult to write and yet give one pleasure and light. What we are at principally is the poem's *manner of expression*, its distinctive style.

But another poet may venture beyond language; he may not always be content with the ways of seeing that the common use of language endorses. He discovers his own distinctive *subject-matter* in a special clearing of his own thought and feeling -- a clearing that he establishes within the language of his poem. This is why, when we first read his poem, he

may appear incomprehensible. He has transformed the language that we know only from its common usage; he has reinvented our language, forged it anew.

Perhaps we can best understand this transformation by noting that *feeling* is first without words, though it is already there, as real as what provoked it; but *thought* is not anything at all, or real only as a haze of abstraction, before it has a distinctive *form* or structure through words. Feeling -- or better perhaps, a sudden intuition -- is the poet's native ground. He is a man of powerful feeling, a lightning rod of intuition, before he is a man of powerful thought. The ground of his feeling or intuition is what is most unique about every poet, and that ground, the inner geography of all his verses, grows more spiritual (or soulful, if you will), more authentic, the more a language is found anew or reinvented to establish its forms in our imagination. Says T. S. Eliot:

> If you came this way,
> Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
> At any time or at any season,
> It would always be the same: you would have to put off
> Sense and notion. ...
> .....
> So I find words I never thought to speak
> In streets I never thought I should revisit
> When I left my body on a distant shore.
> .....
> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.****

At first, the soil of a given language is only broken, as verses (Latin *versus*: "furrows"). The language so tilled cannot at first *speak us* anew because no speech has as yet been found. But as the common usage of lan-

**** From Eliot's "Little Gidding": Eliot: 138-45.

guage, and its accepted or conventional poetic idiom, are cauterized of dead eyes, or made to serve new perceived connections between things, the poet begins to discover his own special clearing *within the language* where the words become no longer vernacular or foreign but the poem's own singular diction. A *new speaking* has been found, and may even speak us more truly than our usual way with words.

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