

Ka Bien, The Good Man

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I have always regarded National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera, a fellow Batangueño, with suspicious awe as I would any man with a quiet and chivalrous disposition in the rambunctious world of Philippine literature.

I have always thought of writers—both *littérateurs* as well as journalists—as robust speakers, too opinionated for their own good, and in ways, invasive when it comes to other people’s works. No other opinion matters save their own, often devoid of the euphemisms and politically correct language that often impede a writer’s freedom of speech and liberty to criticize. To many writers, calling a spade a spade is tantamount to a religion, an excursion well-nigh into the spiritual and mystical. To be heard, to be read without pause: it’s almost masochistic, particularly in a country where telling the truth is not only thought of as defiant, it is a crime.

Let us not even venture to where novelist Chinua Achebe described the writer as one who “lives on the fringe of society—wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. He is in revolt against society, which in turn looks on him with suspicion, if not hostility. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything” (Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, “The Novelist as Teacher,” p.40).

Ka Bien, as I fondly called him, seemed to be anything but ruffian in word and deed. A thug with a better-than-average glossary of words he was surely not, not with his familiar reticence and classic restraint, not to mention that seeming shyness in the face of a crowd. He was, by all standards, the toned-down, kindhearted grandfather some of us probably dreamt of having, with his sympathetic eyes and munificent demeanor sadly lacking in authors with Krakens as egos.

When I bumped into Ka Bien at the Philippine Center of International PEN Conference in 2015, where I was to deliver a talk as part of a panel of speakers, his face lit up, and he said with the warmest smile with which I've ever been greeted: "Joel, I'm glad you can make it." Back then, I was too much of a fledgling writer to be noticed by anyone, let alone a National Artist. But he noticed.

Another memorable encounter happened earlier in June 2012. I and a host of other writers were invited by the Philippine Center of International PEN to submit a paper on the subject of "Uses of Literature". Mine in particular centered on S.P. Lopez's *committed* writing and National Artist José García Villa's *l'art pour l'art*.

As a young writer and journalist, it was a rare moment for me to rub elbows with the country's foremost intellectuals, including the poet Gémino Abad, novelists Elmer Ordoñez, F. Sionil José and Jun Cruz Reyes, historian José Victor Torres, and National Artist and dramatist Bien Lumbera, to name a few. Anxiety had already hit me in the days prior, and earlier in the day itself.

Be that as it may, my hourlong lecture, titled "Neither Slaves to Lesser Gods: Revisiting Erudition and Enchantment," went smoothly, even sparked a heated debate between Gémino Abad and, if memory serves, Elmer Ordoñez, on literature as propaganda as opposed to literature as a sociopolitical tool. In that lecture, I wagered on the idea that the enchantment found in literature must not shy away from the blood-dripped soil of revolutionary causes, even banding together with the candid claims of polemical writing and journalism. I've included this particular lecture in my newest book, *In the Line of Fire: Lectures*.

"What Lopez and García had all along perceived as the 'Great Divide'—severing the Byron of 'cloudless climes and starry skies' from the Neruda of the 'dry and bloody planet of heroes'—reveals nothing but the distance of a whisper. The journalist and storyteller, poet and philosopher, psalmist and scholar: these are the curators of heaven and earth, war and peace, the real and the fantastic. Writers must speak of the bougainvillea as well as the *bartolina*, death and *dama de noche*, elegies and enchantments. These form the crux of our lives not only as Filipinos, but as a free people fighting for their will to live."

Little did anyone know at the time that my call for writers of varying persuasions and disciplines to unite under the banner of our "will to live" would sooner than expected be our rallying cry just a mere four years into the future.

Shortly after I delivered the talk, Ka Bien approached me and requested a copy of my piece. “Joel, if it’s okay with you, I would love to have a copy of your lecture.” I was both happy and astonished at the request. I handed him the paper and rushed home that day, thinking that I had, perhaps, accomplished something significant, enough to get the attention and interest of a National Artist.

The connection between art and politics had always been at the foreground of Ka Bien’s thoughts. I arrived at this conclusion soon after I interviewed Ka Bien on a rather unique subject: the inclusion of Communist Party of the Philippines founder Jose Maria “Joma” Sison in the list of candidates for National Artist for Literature.

I had received a letter from Ka Bien requesting that I openly endorse Joma Sison for the post. I replied that as a journalist, it would better serve the cause of truth if he would allow me an hourlong exclusive interview on this matter.

Whether there was some doubt as to the cause literature is pursuing, be that art or politics, Ka Bien quickly dispelled all that. To him, *art will always be political*, and nowhere can it be said that it is not.

“Literary theory had always stressed at the time that the artist is not committed to winning readers over,” Ka Bien said during the interview. “Art is something the individual approaches and hopes that in it, he will find something that exalts his being, makes him feel better about life and himself.”

As a young writer dependent on the teachings of the West, as espoused by many in the academe at the time, Ka Bien’s initial response was to go with the flow of Western literary thought.

“At the time, I believed firmly in the fact that the writer has no duty whatsoever to win people over to his thinking [...] Some of the poems were difficult to understand. That was part of the cause of modern poetry. As a poet, your duty is not to tell people what to think. The poet presents his artworks as only a poet should. People are supposed to understand, and by so doing, orient themselves to the kind of thinking that the poem called for.”

He added: “The duty of the writer is to put together words that will create in the reader that elusive sense of art. This is something that the New Criticism imposed on us aspiring writers. As a writer I wanted to be part of the scene, and if the scene calls for poetry that is difficult to understand, then I should be writing something like that.”

Whatever political insensibility that was found in earlier artistic works, Ka Bien blamed, among others, on the geopolitical tensions which

shaped the times. “In the United States at the time, the time of the Cold War, there was a very strong move towards art that has no commitment to ideas. The writer is told that he’s unique as an individual, and that he has nothing to do with an audience. He writes and his works are presented in publications, but there’s no selling of a particular idea or ideology. Ideology was anathema at the time, largely because the Cold War was between the United States and the Soviet Union, and therefore, any inclination on the part of the writer towards ideas puts him in the same camp as those with ideologies.”

However, the rise of the student movements paved the way for Ka Bien to change his approach to artistic and literary writing.

“In the 1960s, early ‘70s, as a result of the student movements, new ideas came into the discussion on art and politics,” he explained. “Mao Tse Tung became not only a political name, but a literary theory.

“In Mao’s essay on writing, as addressed to the Chinese writers who were gathered prior to the triumph of Communism in China, Mao’s theory was that art has never been free from political ideas. To him, art is always political, it’s always directed at people, and asking people to see how to conduct their lives, their relationship with government and authority. That was when I started to change my outlook as a young writer. The idea that one writes to reach an audience, this is already a political gesture on the part of the artist.”

Going by this theory, Ka Bien based his endorsement of Joma Sison on the life of another polemicist and artist, National Artist Amado V. Hernandez:

“Amado V. Hernandez is the icon of the movement. It is through his works and political activities that one understands that his art is really dedicated to the pursuit of the welfare of the masses. He, too, was an organizer, and a writer of essays and polemics, apart from his novels.”

Ka Bien’s commitment to committed literature reminds me of the words of another National Artist whose poetry and essays never shrunk from the realities that plagued his time: the late Cirilo F. Bautista: “There can never be a ceasefire in the writer’s war with the irrational, the incompetent, and the corrupt” (Cirilo F. Bautista, *The House of True Desire*, “Notes on the Literary Life,” p. 355).

In the same book, Bautista wrote: “An artless society harvests the sting of its neglect. It will have few means to fend off the backlash of high corruption and gross bureaucratic ineptitude that slowly eats the foundations of our patrimony [...] This has always been the condition of cultural progress,

of imaginative advance—that is, the reconstruction from reality to language allows some degree of human salvation even from the most dehumanizing experience.”

As a journalist writing the political for a little over 30 years, I tend to lean more towards Ka Bien’s ideas about art and writing for the simple fact that the times will always demand it. This is a good deal more serious and engaging than what is touted in some circles as art. All the more when such expressions are penned using Filipino.

In Ka Bien’s book, *Tagalog Poetry, 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences in its Development*, he wrote: “Knowing the limitations of the native syllabry as a literary medium, the student cannot accept without qualification the usual explanation that the friars destroyed the relics of paganism among their converts, or that the literature was recorded on highly perishable materials which disintegrated before scholars could get a hold of them.”

Writing for half my lifetime in English, I cannot read Ka Bien’s words without bowing in shame.

Mitigating the brevity of life with the longevity of art is easier said than done. All the more within a regime of murder, corporate greed, and corruption. In order for such an achievement to be possible, a reasonable consensus among the public should be culled from artistic expression. Censorship aims to starve artistic and polemical expressions, just as freedom gives them the breath of life.

It must be incumbent, therefore, on writers and artists to insist that freedom of expression and of the press is no different from freedom for all. These two rights intertwine: the right to speak and the right to know. There are no two ways about it, because the violation of one is the violation of the other.

My rather brief encounters with Ka Bien had taught me more than all the years I’ve spent as writer and editor combined. He has become, in more ways than I can explain, my North Star. Ka Bien and others like him have elevated political writing into an art form, opening the doors for polemicists like myself into the world of spectacular imagination. Such an advantage gives us elbow room to maneuver and operate in two different worlds, but nevermore different as fire is to light.

Reserved and largely quiet though he may have been during the better part of our brief friendship, Ka Bien had inspired me to never fear to stand “in the line of fire, that place of honor.” ♦