

# Bienvenido Lumbera's Contribution to Regional Literature: A Tribute

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A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is the horizon, the boundary.  
—Martin Heidegger

This short essay honors Bienvenido Lumbera's intellectual and scholarly achievement and contribution to regional literature in the Philippines. *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology*, co-authored with Cynthia Nograles Lumbera, promotes a network of literary production among writers, teachers and students across the Philippines. It does not only constitute local literatures but is a national endeavor. In the manner of Martin Heidegger, it is a "worlding" of literature. In doing so, Lumbera was a visionary. His work fills an enormous lacuna in the literary development of Philippine creativity and in the holistic teaching of our literature.

Lumbera's orientation, specifically comparative literature, is profoundly immersed in history, politics and language. In the age of disciplinary overspecialization, he is a unique gem. The approach he employs can be characterized as the blend of these three.

I was very fortunate in 2001 to be teaching Literatures of the Philippines at the University of San Carlos in Cebu City. I found the book which Docs Bien and Cynthia put together and used it for my undergraduate classes. This anthology is probably the most famous in terms of its use of the word "region." Those places outside of imperial Manila. I was struck by the

word. Writings from the margins, so to speak, then. But were they really? What I did was go back to reading and find out what the word means. It seemed to me that the people in the universities elsewhere were talking about something that I was interested in, but they had a different notion on what “region” meant.

In this essay I will go over what I believe is the most productive part of Lumbera’s literary theory, the part that highlights Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and its application here which is literary hermeneutics. Broadly formulated, regional literature is “intercultural hermeneutics” whose prerequisite is “language.” A few words of caution are in order here: reading together Lumbera’s literary work and Gadamer’s hermeneutics—both philosophical and applied—will, I am certain, advance the cause of regional literature.

What literary criticism and philosophical hermeneutics have in common is their focus on language. Hermeneutics is the foundation of all academic disciplines, both in the natural and social sciences. First of all, language is fundamental to the humanity of humans: it is the human specificity of literary hermeneutics. Lumbera presents in straightforward manner: “[a]side from filtration by class, there was also filtration by language. With English as medium of instruction, works by Filipino authors found only limited space . . . Thus was the canon of Philippine literature . . . Thus was our ‘national literature’ constructed.”<sup>1</sup> Lumbera emphasizes the importance of an open-ended and rightly reciprocal dialogue/system as the paradigm of the “community,” which ethnocentrism cannot afford to hold on to or practice. Reciprocal dialogue brings mutual change and enrichment between the languages/literatures involved. In the “Afterword” of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer draws a conclusion on the openness of his hermeneutics, based on dialogue, when he writes: “The ongoing dialogue permits no final conclusion. It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last word.”<sup>2</sup>

Lumbera’s contribution to Philippine literature is immense and impressive. By bridging the divide between the regions and the nation, he has transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries. His literary hermeneutics creates a bridge between the regions and the nation, in which the differences of their cultural politics can be negotiated, so that the superficial binary

<sup>1</sup> Bienvenido Lumbera, *Harnessing Regional Literature for National Literature. Writing the Nation / Pag-akda ng Bansa*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2000. 153-156. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 579.

opposition between the two can be dissolved. In comparative literature, for which the problematics of translatability or translation are the first issue, their truth is found, not lost, in translation.

Nais ko lamang igiit ang nawala sa panitikang Tagalog nang nadamay ito sa usaping pangwika nang maging batayan ng wikang pambansa ang wikang Tagalog. Importante sa palagay ko na pag-ukulan ng pansin ng manunulat unang-una ang mga realidad na tuwirang nauugnayan niya, nang sa ganoon ay makalikha siya ng daigdig sa akda na hitik sa mga katunayang siyang nagpapasigla sa pagsasalaysay at sa pagtula. Sa maikling salita, ang “panrehiyon” ay siyang batayang daigdig ng manlilikha, at kung maging “pambansa” man siya ay sa dahilang ang kanyang mga katangiang “panrehiyon” ay nagsilbing tuntungan tungo sa higit na malawak na daigdig sa labas ng rehiyon.<sup>3</sup>

Lumbera highlights the importance of “translation” in the widest sense of the term. But it will be a big mistake, however, to regard translation just as a means to negotiate between languages and literature, because by itself it belongs to the area of comparative study.

There is an impediment in the problematics of translation: for students who are willing to read in Filipino to advance their understanding, rather than learning other languages and literatures, which admittedly is a hard and demanding endeavor. The difficulty is doubled because in translation the question of meaning is doubled, that is, it has to decipher and constitute the meaning of meaning. The most difficult part for students in learning literatures from the region is often the lack of will power to learn other languages; whereas scholars and comparatists learn, by necessity, difficult languages, including foreign ones. As the saying goes, where there is a will, there is a way. The truth of this saying is clear in the fact that there is now a rising number of Westerners who are interested in the Philippines, including learning Filipino, precisely because its cultural heritage is different from theirs.

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<sup>3</sup> Bienvenido Lumbera, “Panitikang Panrehiyon, Panitikang Pambansa: Magkabukod at Magkarugtong” *Writing the Nation / Pag-akda ng Bansa*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2000. 162-165. 164.

In 1976 Resil Mojares wrote an essay titled “On Native Grounds: The Significance of Regional Literature,”<sup>4</sup> which tackles the lapses of uncritical equations between national and regional literatures. First, the literary experience of the regions operate “within the limits of their respective traditions as expressed or transmitted in their own languages.”<sup>5</sup> He cites how the readership of the English-language magazine of the 1930s, *Philippine Magazine*, pales in its monthly readership of 6,500, compared to locally circulated regional magazines of the same period in Cebu of *Babaya* (8,000 weekly) and *Bag-ong Kusog* (10,975 weekly) or the Ilonggo *Ylang-Ylang* (7,793 weekly) and *Banaag* (10,560 weekly). Second, regarding the regional literary productions found in books, pamphlets and periodicals, Mojares notes that “against 64 Filipino novels in English produced in 1921-1966, some 1,000 Tagalog novels were published in the first quarter of the present century alone.”<sup>6</sup> Third, the rich oral traditions have to be taken into consideration, given that recently many oral texts have been recovered. Mojares’s essay unquestionably parallels Lumbera’s efforts toward a Philippine community which rejects cultural parochialism.

A study of regional and vernacular literature, therefore, should lead us to a fuller understanding of the Philippine cultural landscape . . . of the cultural concomitants of the “areal differentiations caused by the gradual variations in the spatial interaction of physical and human elements.”<sup>7</sup>

The resourceful but untapped idea of Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” in *Truth and Method* is an open invitation to infinite dialogue in the conversation between the nations and the nation. In dialogical communication, there is interdisciplinarity. There is also the open-arms attitude which Gadamer calls the “soul of hermeneutics.” In a real dialogue, no one has the last word.

Lumbera’s literary environment was a nationalist one. We do not have to stretch our imaginations too far to connect the regions and the nation. His “etymofilipinology” is bound to concepts of nation, language, and literature. Whoever unravels the symbols of nation is a magician of some sort, like the

<sup>4</sup> Resil Mojares, “On Native Grounds: The Significance of Regional Literature.” *Literature and society: cross-cultural perspectives*: Eleventh American Studies Seminar. Ed. Roger Bresnahan. Los Baños, Philippines. October 1976. 154-158.

<sup>5</sup> Mojares 155.

<sup>6</sup> Mojares 156.

<sup>7</sup> Mojares 157.

*babaylan* who was capable of generating power both poetic and political. There are two issues that can be examined—the relationship between literature as a specialized form of language and language in general and, literatures as powerful/political performative acts.

Many writer-critics believe that literature (referred to by the ancients as “poetry”) is the first language of the human race and the poet is the first human. Literature and language are joined at the navel, and we make no distinction between the diversity of scripts (present around the Philippines prior to colonization) engraved on bamboo or wooden objects, and the symbols that show not only that literature is inseparable from language, but also that it is the “origin” of language itself.

To borrow from “The Poet” by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a very eloquent and appropriate passage:

The poets made all the words, and therefore, language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer.<sup>8</sup>

From the perspective of etymofilipinology, one does not have to think twice about the origin of the *ambahan*.

Lumbera recognizes literature as performative and writes that:

[W]here the author is conscious of his responsibilities to his audience, there is always an aspect of that world that he emphasizes to implant an impression, an attitude, or even a perspective in the reader . . . what I take to be the meaning of the expression “reading as a humanizing experience.”<sup>9</sup>

By the same token, the task of performing our literature cannot simply be to “humanize” young Filipinos. I would like to use Lumbera’s phrase, *to*

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: Second Series*. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Bienvenido Lumbera, “Filipinizing the Young Filipino Reader.” *Writing the Nation / Pag-akda ng Bansa*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2000. 116-120. 116-117.

*Filipinize young Filipinos.*<sup>10</sup> Literature gives us more concrete truth and actions (as language) are performative means, in which “literature” and action are reversible events. Literature consists of motion, made of action; and action consists of language, made alongside the language of words. When words fail we resort to the language of action, so action is inherent in literature.

Regional literature as formulated in this essay is a constellation of concepts, drawn mainly from our National Artists. It is for me a coming to terms with the nation—for that matter, of overcoming ethnocentrism in general—which essentializes a specific culture in any given territory. As a constellation that connects several lines in any given point, it signifies the confluences and crossings of different and seemingly disconnected areas. These confluences and crossings result in hybridities, whether they be confluences and crossings of cultures or academic disciplines. Hybridity, or the fusion of horizons (in Gadamer’s sense), will melt ethnocentric ignorance.

Regional literature is necessarily a de/constructive concept. It goes beyond what is established or given by constructing a new formation of concepts. In the portmanteau word “deconstruction,” construction contains in itself destruction. So, regional literature is an attempt to challenge the assumed dominance of the “national” and to overcome its limits. As a paradigm shifter, it is the way of discovering the already existing reality of Philippine literary convergences “from within,” that frees the “nation” from uniformity.

Lumbera is an exceptional advocate for a Filipinoness that symbolizes its interdependence and interconnectedness. His vision is concerned not only with the in-between matters that are intercultural, interdisciplinary and interlinguistic crossings, but also with transformation. It cannot be otherwise. Since the orchestration of this regional literature will be an infinite process, let me quote, in conclusion, a line from Lumbera that I am fond of: “Truly, Filipinizing the young Filipino reader will transform the teacher of reading from a simple transmitter of skill into a cultural activist. Doubtless, the teacher’s work will be more fulfilling, for what used to be a mechanical chore takes on a dynamism that is bound, in the long run, to transform an outdated system.”<sup>11</sup> ♦

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<sup>10</sup> Lumbera, “Filipinizing” 117. (italics added).

<sup>11</sup> Lumbera, “Filipinizing” 119-120.