

## SAVING A LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE

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I belong to that generation that learned to read in English. All our life, a would always be for apple, or epol, aypol, apol. Some of us went on to master English. The retreating colonial leg behind a slew of reading materials. English was in our educational system, in our government, and in the world of business. Our entire intellectual life and the operations of society was anchored on the primacy of English. On top of all this, there was the overwhelming influence of media.

I learned Literature in English under the tutelage of great teachers: Edilberto and Edith Tiempo. For these two writers, it was inconceivable to write in any Filipino language, To their mind, there was no future in Literature performed in any Filipino language particularly Binisaya. In the 60s and 70s, it was commonplace for parents, academics to frown on anyone reading Bisaya, Yuhum and Hiligaynon. Bulaklak and Liwayway were tolerated because it was m Tagalog, the so-called national language. We kids read them in secret, or if we dared flaunt our lowbrow predilections, we just ignore remarks like "What do you get out of that? Read something better, something more elevating." I might grossly sum up my attitudes in those days thus: Learn in English, think in English, write in English. I had resolved even then to keep away from controversies of language. I had the misguided idea that by writing in English, I was above any language problem since English cut across the entire nation and was accepted locally and in the whole world.

This seems to be a common affliction among the university-bred. They suffer intellectual isolation from the homegrown Bisaya culture. Being merely local, Bisaya has not been legitimized and valorized as a proper subject of inquiry. My own sense of dissociation may have been because I did not grow up in any one place in the Visayas. I was born in Duenas, Iloilo, among speakers of Kinaray-a. But I did not grow up in a Kinaray-a-speaking community. My family was always moving when I was a child. Consequently, I did not grow up in a hometown, felt no allegiance to my birthplace, having leg it when I was barely five years old. On the other hand I have adopted several mother languages and cannot lay claim to the one I was born with. However, memory is more tenacious than one allows. Though I can no longer speak Kinaray-a, I can understand most of it, oral or written. After all I have never entirely lost my mother tongue.

Through the years, however, I developed an understanding of the importance of mother language, how it shapes identity, how it bridges and bonds the people using it, how a language blocks the stranger from penetrating into a world in which they are not welcome, and conversely, how knowing a language enables a person to become part of a world from which he might have been excluded. There came a point, however, when I began to feel the inadequacy of English to mirror the life I wanted to tell about in my work. It came to my mind that a Filipino who writes in English is engaged in the constant act of translation. We have all heard that line, "Lost in translation." Between one language to another, meanings lose their immediacy or become distorted. Moods, feelings, nuances spin out of control.

Years after graduate school, I made the acquaintance of some serious Cebuano writers and read some of their works. I heard new voices redolent with the authentic flavors of life in the countryside as I had encountered it. The stories and poems told in the lived language of the people had depth and breadth that were harder to achieve with English. This was in the 80s, that time when the country was reeling from the dying throes of Martial Law. I have always earned my living as a teacher of English. During these years, I noted the deterioration of English proficiency among the students. This must be the effect of the shift to bilingualism, using Filipino and English as medium of instruction. Whether learning in general improved with this innovation, I cannot say, but English proficiency had truly deteriorated, even in Silliman University, that Visayan campus which we could consider to this day as a bastion of English.

I started getting involved in Creative Writing as a graduate student of English at Silliman University. Because of the bilingual system in the schools, students still wrote in English or Filipino their tentative experiments in fiction and poetry. Understandably, the Bisaya tended to write more in English than in Filipino. No Literature, or only the poorest, came out of these attempts, I suppose due to poor mastery of either languages. In the restrictive and censorial atmosphere of Martial Law and in the confusion of our language issues, the young were effectively being locked into incoherence, unable to find the language to express their songs and poems and to tell their stories.

It was still Martial Law when we held the first Creative Writing Workshop in UPV Tacloban College in 1984. Our participants were grassroots poets from all over Samar and Leyte, retired public school teachers, farmers, fishermen, retired office clerks. One of them was not even literate, he had to ask his son to write his poems for him. Most of them were participants and winners of the *DYVL Aksyon Radio puplongan* contest.

Dr. Victor N. Sugbo, Dr. David A. Genotiva and myself, who organized that workshop, were all university-trained. We learned our poetics from western models and were deplorably ignorant of the social and aesthetic background against which our participants were writing. Using the yardstick of our university learning, we found the poems lacking. Nevertheless the poets stayed and listened and argued with us good-naturedly. I cringe to remember our mutual frustration. There was no way we could have understood each other—we were talking from our abstruse university-oriented paradigms, they listened with ears tuned by the earthy culture of their rural background.

We got a strong dose of humility from that experience. It drove me at least to learn more, to discover poetry from the ground up, so to speak. More and more over the years I grew in the belief that the future of Philippine Literature is in the writer who writes from his or her own mother language which he uses with pride and fluency.

Practical questions arise: Who will publish the works? Who will read them? Literature is not very saleable, it could take ten years to move a thousand copies of a book of poetry in English or in Filipino. A book on Cebuano poetry does not sound like good investment, considering its limited readership. These considerations are commonly raised to discourage writing in the mother language. Yet for any writer, as for any other artist worth his/her salt, getting the poem, story, or novel in shape is the primary concern.

Printed Literature had disappeared among the Warays over the last century. There were a few odd publications during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which produced what we might consider the canon of the Waray *siday* or poem. The second half Waray Literature remained dominantly oral and the writers took to their closets, writing in loneliness and seclusion. There was no venue to publish except radio. The pressure was to write in English and Filipino, but the competition for literary space was fierce. We can now say that the writing did not stop among the poets of the language. The Waray experience is perhaps true to all other marginalized Filipino languages, except possibly Cebuano and Ilocano.

There always had been devoted literary practitioners in Binisaya, among the Cebuanos: Gumer Rafanan who writes from Iligan City; Temistokles Adlawan from Naga; Gremer Chan Reyes from Bogo; Rene Estela Amper from Boljoon; Ernie Lariosa, and scores of others whose works come out in the popular *Bisaya Magazine* or in *SunStar* or *Superbalita*. Then the University of San Carlos set up the Cebuano Studies Center under the direction of Dr. Resil B. Mojares, and Dr. Erlinda K. Alburo. The Center set up funds for continuous research, performed an inventory of pertinent knowledge about the Cebuano culture, from history to civics to language and literature, and established a library which became repository for matters relevant to Cebuano language and culture. The Cornelio Faigao Creative Writing Workshop, hosted by the USC-CSC, is still the center of writing in Cebuano, gathering into its annual event young and old writers within the Cebuano speaking provinces of Bohol, Negros Oriental, Leyte and Samar, and those coming from as far south as Davao, Cotabato and Zamboanga.

The Faigao Workshop produced a number of young writers in the mother tongue, among them, Myke Obenieta, Ulysses Aparece, Corazon Almerino, Josua Cabrera, Ester Tapia, Januar Yap, and Adonis Durado. These writers were also nurtured by the *Ludabi* and the *Bathalad*. These young voices are unique because they have departed from the traditional modes of versification of Visayan poetry and ventured into experimental forms and attitudes greatly

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influenced by contemporary Western poetics. The vigor of contemporary Cebuano writing today may be attributed to the following factors:

- A valorized tradition of writing. Thus young writers know they are inserting themselves into a well-established and revered literary lineage.
- The presence of nurturing individuals and institutions. Strong organizations supporting the work of the young writer. This would include such long-established writers' groups as the Bathalad and the WILA. Until recently the Bathalad was a traditionally all-male writing group. The WILA is exclusively an organization of women writers. These organizations provide company and encouragement. They also mount activities and events to broaden interest and readership.
- Venue for publication provided by the *Bisaya Magazine* and *Sunstar Magazine*, and *Superbalita*. *Sunstar Magazine* which comes out every weekend, and *Superbalita* which commands a readership of some 15,000, based mainly on the number of copies it circulates daily, are especially significant for the growth of Cebuano writing, especially in the urban centers where these publications circulate.

Not so very long ago, I found myself teaching a course on Philippine Literature in the Languages. I start my classes by asking my Waray students whether they love their native language. I always get an overloud YES! Who are the best authors in Waray? I would continue. They would turn around to look at one another in puzzlement. Are there such things? A timid voice would venture a name, "Lucente? Makabenta?" Have you heard or read any of their works? Of course no one has.

I ask them whether they have ever encountered elegant speech or expressions in their mother language. If they don't know their poets, how can they know what elegant language is? They, like us in our time, have all been mis-educated to think that beautiful language is possible only in English. We seem to have limited the usage of our language to the affairs of daily life, the marketplace, the kitchen, the streets. If our mother language is marginalized in the national level, we have contributed to the marginalization by setting aside its literary glories, forgetting that the pride and glory of a culture surely rests in good thoughts expressed in beautiful language.

I am almost certain this state of things prevails across the Visayas. This widespread ignorance is the effect of the systematic way in which our educational curricula has consistently excluded local culture, language and history from our classrooms, or paid the merest token attention to them. It almost seems as if the Visayan culture does not exist or if it does, is not worth talking about, almost as if on our way to nationhood, the Bisaya did nothing but sit on the fence and look. I would not say that only the young are afflicted by this lack of knowledge, for I too, my generation, that is, also suffered from a monumental ignorance, so busy had we been in assimilating learning from the West that dominated our classrooms.

But we are past the season of regret. There is no need to reject what history has brought into our midst and forced us to learn. So it is that in teaching our young to write we have not hesitated in adapting the broad influences of world literature in shaping Philippine contemporary literature in the mother tongue. This process has been going on well over four decades now, initiated by Leoncio Deriada in the West Visayas in the 80s, the Faigao Workshop in Central Visayas at approximately the same period, and early in the 90s, by the UPV Creative Writing Program in Eastern Visayas. Poetry published over the last thirty to forty years departs in form and techniques from traditional Visayan poetics. These transformations and departures are not only inevitable but necessary. Most contemporary Visayan poets today are university-trained and hence have a wider choice of resources to work from. The grassroots writer eke out their art the best way they can. They remain the gap in our effort to gather the spoken word in our midst. If we want to keep our memory whole, we must listen too, to what they have to say.

In December of 2008, fifteen young writers assembled in UPV Tacloban College for the last Creative Writing Workshop I would ever hold under its auspices. These fifteen writers were among the few who have cleared some ground in the literary arts—they are well-published, some of them have published books, won awards and recognition, and are actively promoting Literature in their respective circles of influence. All of them are university trained, all of them have deep thoughts on language and literature, and remarkably, a number of them are writing in

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their mother tongue. We have found in the works of these young writers the future and the hope for our mother languages. For the literary use of language refreshes the language, puts it beyond the pale of ordinariness, redeems us from triteness and cliché. Literature keeps the words alive and preserves them within the locus of the culture. Above all, it restores the language among the sources of our pride, especially for those of us here in the regions.

Ariel Dorfman, Chilean expatriate, novelist, poet and Distinguished Professor at Duke University, might have been talking about us, as he worried over language and migration and the way it reduces the migrant to minority status on account of the strangeness of his language. He says, "Regarding language and migration, I never forget the questions that are so often neglected when progress is abstractly celebrated, the questions that the real suffering human subjects face, one by one by one. Do you come from a place that is poor, that is not fully incorporated into modernity, that does not control a language that commands respect? Do you inhabit a language that does not have armies behind it and bombs and modems and technology? Do you reside in a language that will one day be extinct or whose existence does not have value in the marketplace and can't even get you a good job and help you in the everyday struggle to survive? Do you dwell in a language that is wonderful only for making love or teaching your children the difference between right and wrong or serves to pray to God? Is your language perfumed with unpronounceable words by poets with unpronounceable names describing their unpronounceable forests and guttural maidens? How does such a language defend itself against the globalizing world?"\*

I am not even worried about the globalizing world. I am mainly concerned about our language policy, which, like it or not, has the unfortunate effect of reducing the rest of the countryside to minority status. We must remind ourselves that the Cebuano or Waray or Hiligaynon that we speak today have always been with us before history catapulted us to invasion, colonialism, conversion, war, independence, economic depression, diaspora, and now, globalization. Throughout this passage, these mother languages have survived, proving themselves resilient and adaptable, despite our disloyalty and neglect. They are the root of our various identities. These mother languages weave the identity we seek to create as a people.

Our advocates have thought of all the ways to save our mother languages—legal and conventional, or radical and revolutionary. We may add to all their wise thoughts and recommendations the creative way: Tell our stories in the old tongue. Let them be told, or written in the languages we learned at the knees. Teach the young to dream, to speak, to sing in the language of the mother. Let the stories and the poems be in everyone's tongue, the songs in everyone's throat. Give them to every man, woman and child in every village of the beautiful islands of the Visayas. Thus will our languages live.

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\*Ariel Dorfman, "The Wandering Bigamists of Language," in Isabel Courtivron, *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. pp. 29-38