

Revaluing Value: An Introduction

At an important public lecture in the University of the Philippines Diliman campus last August, one of the policy recommendations made by the speaker was the continued and intensified support not only of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) but also of the Social Sciences.

The speaker did not recognize the Humanities, which occurred nowhere in his painstakingly assembled survey, that correlated the generally disappointing figures of UP Diliman's science PhD programs with their respective research outputs. The College of Social Sciences and Philosophy was accounted for, as was the Philippine Studies program, with which he conflated it. This part of his survey was misleading, because Philippine Studies in our university, from its inception, has always drawn as much from the Humanities as from the Social Sciences, being co-administered by the CSSP with two other colleges—both of which profess avowedly humanistic orientations.

Nonetheless, the oversight is a familiar one: it simply attests to the secondary and even epiphenomenal position occupied by the disciplines of the arts and humanities in a national education system that has come to see progress and development as being the privileged province and exclusive responsibility of the scientific—as opposed to the creative—persuasions.

And yet progress and development, even when they are understood in strictly economic terms, cannot be equated with the promotion and growth of the sciences alone. At the first system-wide UP Knowledge Festival, held in Tagaytay last April, the participants from UP's different constituent universities heard from two plenary speakers inventories of hard data that showed just how supporting the arts—and the creative industries that they generate—makes sound economic sense, especially in the knowledge regimes of this new century.

The clarion call was sounded: there really is no reason why the University of the Philippines should not promote the growth and welfare of its humanities programs, as well as their resident artists and scholars, because

the creative industries—whose components are already in evidence across its campuses—may well hold the key to improving the lives of the vast majority of our people, who continue to be uneducated and poor.

It's easily apparent that the University of the Philippines hosts the country's highest density of resident writers, visual and digital artists, musicians, performers, content providers, animators, cultural critics, curators, filmmakers, theorists, directors, designers, and architects, all of whose intellectual properties can be harnessed and cultivated to contribute even more significantly to our country's economy, as the works of creatives already unmistakably do, in many other parts of the world. These artistic products and processes collectively constitute our national culture, which migratory technologies and populations offer the opportunity of becoming globally disseminated and consumed, especially through the agency of diasporic Filipinos located in every other corner of the planet.

Among other things, the mission of artists is to promote forms of embodied, "imaginal," and creative literacy, that serve to complement as well as provide a solid foundation for the other more abstract and propositional forms of literacy (for example, the numerate and the experimental). As such, they bridge the historical, cognitive, and ontological gaps between our enduring orality on one hand and our uneven and precarious literacy on the other, bringing into the durable media of the contemporary arts the stories, insights, and rituals of our country's copious and immemorial cultures, whose deepest intuition recognizes the dualisms of our world, even as in the same breath it seeks to transcend them, by yearning into the radiance of the unity that underlies all forms.

On the other hand, we perhaps also need to remember the truth that value—a crucial buzzword in that selfsame Knowledge Festival—cannot be reduced to the merely monetary or the monetizable. Because humans are symbol-making creatures capable of inwardness and sublime vision, for our species value can also be and is, in many important ways, intangible. Despite the convincing purchase of the "creative industries" argument, we need to ask ourselves, precisely in regard to this issue: Should the arts or the humanities be justified only because they can be said to constitute their own "economy"? What is happiness? Why do we crave "connectedness" and love? What is gratitude? Why must we strive for empathy? What constitutes fulfillment? Where do rapture and awe come from? What makes a fully human or even just a "livable" life? Given the socioeconomic pressures that higher education

in our country is increasingly needing to bear, we need to believe that there remains institutional room, especially in this esteemed university, for the short story, poem, or play that cannot be remotely instrumentalized, and yet insists on raising these and other similar questions— whose most likely value, in turn, is that they can be raised at all ...

I am reminded of a high school classmate and friend—an accomplished scientist who has been living overseas for a couple of decades now. He visited me in my tiny and unkempt office in the ill-lit (and ill-fated) Faculty Center a couple of years ago, and after I toured him around the spanking new buildings of the science and engineering complexes, he calmly told me (obviously meaning to commiserate): “It is you, in the humanities, who make life meaningful; while it is we—the scientists—who make life possible.” Even now, the second part of his sentence still gives me pause. Isn’t everything named—that dawns in our consciousness—meaning? Who gave scientists their idea of possibility, when before anything can be engineered or assembled it first has to be imagined? The “we” in his sentence: where might he have gotten it? How are intuitions of collective life acquired? And what of life itself? Surely it’s not just about protoplasm, the convergence of physical and biochemical processes, or the replication of genetic material. Finally, “making” is something artists do all the time. We who study and produce literature sometimes call it *poiesis*: artistic creativity is (as Aristotle once put it) the bringing into being of something new in the world.

One of the simplest and truest “lessons” in that wonderful Knowledge Festival wasn’t entirely unforeseen; indeed, the abundant folklore and mythology of our peoples, and the paradoxical procedure of most artists, have always attested to it: there is a rudimentary “oneness” in Nature that defies both analytical decomposition and disciplinary boundaries. The contact zones between the arts and the sciences are multiple and fascinating and in constant flux, and they bid us to see that both “realms” of experience are important—trafficking mutually as they do in analogical modes of thinking and perceiving. Thus, they should not be made to compete with one another. We dignify our world—and ourselves—by recognizing wholeness. We parse and hierarchize knowledge to our own peril. In the words of National Artist Edith Lopez Tiempo, “Truth is the world believed: / only what the eye sees, / and the heart approves.”

While UP has certainly made great and admirable strides in equalizing incentives and opportunities among its constituents, a paradigm shift is

necessary, still and all, in view of recent global trends toward unbridled materialist scientism, and given the way priorities in the education system have been planned and operationalized, across the decades, in our country.

For instance, it would be nice if arts high schools could be set up as a complement to the science high schools. And then, within the different campuses of the University of the Philippines—our country’s one and only national university—efforts might be undertaken to renovate and build physical infrastructure that would function as creativity hubs, with the requisite studios, workshops, ateliers, “thinking spaces,” and performance venues, in which resident and visiting creatives might get to work, in a variety of solitary and collaborative arrangements.

In accounting for the University’s “suprastructure” of intellectual workers, the input of cultural practitioners and creatives might likewise be included, their productions catalogued and celebrated alongside the scholarly articles and books that have thus far enjoyed the exclusive attention of the various survey-takers, with their cumbersome diagrams and number-laden charts. The much-repeated lament over the University’s dismal research profile can perhaps be palliated when the many excellent theatrical productions, concerts, recitals, films, books of short stories, literary journals, novels, poems, memoirs, biographies, essays, plays, painting and sculpture exhibits, design projects, videos, installations, “happenings” and performances, curatorial practices, and countless other instances of creative productivity are incorporated into a more holistic picture of our University’s overall literacy agenda. There may be no local or global precedents for this kind of metric, but seeing as how ranking systems are pretty much a matter of product branding, it’s about time we consider originating our own brand of academic analytics—one that takes cognizance of the specificities of our situation as a residually oral (and unevenly literate) nation, whose painful transitions it is its artists’ ardent duty to document, direct, and inspire.

These same creativity hubs could be the site where Complexity Studies might finally take root in our beloved University, bringing the various academic knowledges to converse with one another. Here the University’s many researchers and creatives may get to envision—and subsequently, fashion or construct—solutions to our country’s manifold problems, whose difficult nature requires the ethical and inspiring consolations (and pleasures) of the imaginative disciplines, as well as the practicality, rigor, and ingenuity of the hard sciences.

THIS IS THE tenth outing of the *Likhaan Journal*, the most prestigious literary journal in our country, and UP's hard-won and incontrovertible contribution to the promotion and growth of creative—as well as, to a certain extent, critical—writing in our country. This journal is externally peer-reviewed, and offers a monetary reward that is comparable to that given by the most important national literary contests.

This time around, and as an additional endorsement of its quality, there are four pieces in this current issue that were subsequently accorded top prizes in the recently concluded Palanca Awards. Sourcing the funds for this journal has been an annual source of anxiety for the UP Institute of Creative Writing precisely because, given the obtaining *scientific* ethos in our country's higher educational system in general, and the UP Diliman campus in particular, successfully arguing for the long-term and intangible value of this endeavor—along with the activities of the other arts—is proving to be no mean feat. Thanks to the lifeline thrown by the UP System—in particular, the Office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs—the UPICW has been able to secure the financial resources for this as well as all its other regular projects (and then some), for at least the next couple of years.

I decided to dispense with the usual interview piece in this issue of the *Likhaan Journal*, and instead to feature a panel discussion of a selection of nationally acclaimed authors whose recent fictional works were published by the UP Press. The topic of this discussion is the practice of realism in our literature—its affordances as well as its limitations. It's a propitious but also deliberate choice, given precisely the institutional reduction of all social value to the materially instrumental, which has resulted in an unspoken but entirely virulent animus against the artistic and creative fields in the university, most clearly apparent in the aboveboard assault on the principles of the liberal arts and the dilution, diminishment, if not downright obliteration of the ideals of General Education.

Needless to say, real-world issues—reality itself—are, as with the scientists and engineers, our writers' and artists' foremost concern, only that unlike their materialist counterparts they understand them contextually and holistically on one hand, and self-reflexively (as inalienably perspectival and a function of verbal and cognitive schemas), on the other.

A cursory survey of the topics covered by the writers in the prose section of this issue should provide a quick glimpse into the mimetic concerns of our young writers, across our two official national languages. It's immensely

interesting to note, for example, that the four stories in Filipino are non-realist or speculative in their approach, unlike the four stories in English, which are resolutely mimetic in style (and worldview).

The Filipino stories talk about a variety of marvelous and dissonant “realities”: an indigent and provincial couple facing a marital crisis after the wife gives birth to a (thankfully, stillborn) snake fetus; a harassed and practically enslaved bakla receptionist working for a local government unit beholding and understandably identifying with a faceless mermaid during their outing on a destitute and nondescript island; a futuristic Metro Manila (and Philippines) caught in the middle of a proverbial and protracted imperialist war between East and West, its bedraggled residents reduced to engaging in outlandish rituals in order to make sense of their situation, that daily include the sight (and the use) of certain remaindered bodies drifting on the Pasig River on their way to the watery graveyard of Manila Bay; and a long-winded, second-person stream-of-consciousness narration that is really an angry and rambling harangue against the deluded and practically ineffectual lives of contemporary and armchair academics who engage in cultural and identity politics fully aware of the fact that, in the real world, the real struggle is and has always been class-based, as can be seen in the plight of our country’s indigenous peoples whose ancestral domains are being despoiled and mined by avaricious state-supported corporations, and whose oral culture may yet survive (in the tokenist forms of transcribed and institutionally co-opted folklore), but whose actual societies and lives may not.

The anglophone pieces are, by contrast, about more mundane experiences, narrated almost matter-of-factly, or at least, referentially (that is to say, realistically): a mother who must confront the impending loss of her strange and preternaturally intelligent *millennial* child to a particularly vicious and “old-world” illness; a period “misalliance” piece about a poor native woman in the southern Philippines who lusts after an upper-class mestizo man, and out of sheer determination and culinary cleverness (bordering on the grossly grotesque) manages to seduce him, become his mistress, bear his mostly unfortunate children, and finally approximate and deserve him, “chromatically” clothed in the pallor of death; an oscillating split-screen narrative about two kinds of present-day Filipino women, whose difference in class backgrounds barely has any effect on their similarly fated expat-involved love lives; and a ghastly childhood secret that involves being a silent accomplice to the gruesome murder of a toddler by a slightly older and palpably “different” playmate.

Going by this sampling of our contemporary fiction, it's clear that our literature remains entirely committed to evoking and making sense of our present-day problems and realities. These stories all powerfully address collectively real and pressing social concerns, a persistent preoccupation that may therefore be said to unify our fictional traditions, despite linguistic differences as well as divergent narrative strategies: the moral love that binds families and communities against adversity; the continuing conflict between reason and superstition; the vexed and vexing question of gender inequality; the pressures of national and international geopolitics; our society's enduring class and cultural inequities; and finally, the confluence between erotic desires and neo/colonial fantasies, especially as concerns our culture's unspoken but persistent social doctrine that holds up the ideal of upward racial mobility (in Hispanic times, this doctrine was known as *para mejorar la raza*).

This interest in social questions also resonates across the essays in this issue, whose topics are personal but also reflective and “processual” (or even information-giving): the travails of a haggard and perpetually harassed train commuter; the unconditional and selfless love of parents for their children (even or especially when they are queer); and the personal and professional rewards of patience and unstinting dedication in the learning of a skill (of the bike-riding or the neurosurgical sort). Implicit or explicit in all these dramatized prose articulations of these issues is an impassioned commentary or critique—an arguably “didactic” quality that links them up to a long and continuous tradition in our literatures, that perhaps constitutes an important part of their “Filipinoness.”

On the other hand, the lone critical essay is an interesting elucidation of the inner workings of the lyrical self-translations of a Filipino gay poet. As a linguistic process self-translation invokes and yet brings into crisis the “equivalency” paradigm that still dominates translation practice in our world today—a strange thing given that this very same world is becoming increasingly multilingual and culturally hybrid, and therefore incontrovertibly self-translational. As the analysis of these specific poems shows, when it comes to self-translation, the otherwise easy and self-evident distinction between “source” and “target” gets fundamentally and productively confounded and blurred—especially where the texts in question bear some form of dissidence or other—precisely because the translator, being herself the author, has complete access to the original text's (which is to say, her own) innermost intentions. While this makes for an inherently interesting (and potentially *aporetic*) hermeneutic situation, what this activity does invariably reveal is the

asymmetry of semantic transpositions—meaning, the cultural domination, mostly unprofessed, within the self-translator herself, of one medium (or language) over another.

Because it's a heresy to paraphrase poetry (whose form and content are effectively and finally indistinguishable), I will not even attempt to try to summarize the pieces in this issue's poetry section. At this point I can only flag or "indicate" them by way of their general projects: the ekphrastic, the historical, the visionary, and the political, with the meditative and the confessional registers running more or less consistently through most of the pieces. Like the short stories, the featured poems in this issue are resolutely mimetic in their commitments, even as their representational burdens, being lyric-specific, do not—indeed, need not—always result in the kinds of inner visualization that descriptive prose passages commonly induce. In poetry, after all, tone is itself capable of generating its own "reality effects," its own manner of referentiality—in regard not to the objective world necessarily, but rather to the question of personality: a kind of "psychic mimesis," ordinarily evoked by idiolectal turns of phrase in the poem itself, that betoken the presence of a unique or even (if we are lucky) a singular voice.

As in most of the fiction and essay pieces, the poems in this batch are culturally invested on one hand, and on the other (lyrically) bear varying measures of social commentary and critique—against (and this is just one way of reading what is really figural and therefore *hypersemantic* expression) social indifference, intolerance, vulgarity, as well as the shame and impunity of forgetting.

To my mind the ekphrastic and "art-inspired" poems in both languages are the most memorable, not the least because in drawing from, adapting, or verbally recasting existing artistic works (usually, of painting, sculpture, or even literature itself), they redouble and clarify their endorsement of the *transfigurative* and world-making power of the creative arts, that indeed possess the unique ability to permeate and transform consciousness, and in the process to inspire and promote their own bright—and intertextual—continuance.

It will perhaps be fitting to end this introduction with the complete text of one of them.

This is "Alinsunod Kay Victor Hugo" by Allan Popa, one of our best poets writing in Filipino and English today.

Sa kabila ng karahasan na nagawa natin
sa isa't isa, sa kabila ng mga kasinungalingan
na pinaniniwalaan upang makapahinga,
sa kabila ng mga pagdurusang pinipiling hindi makita,
sa kabila ng mga nalimot na,

magsusulat ako,

gamit ang mga kamay
na marami na ring nagawang pagkakasala,
ngunit naniwalang may mababago pa,
kahit munti, kahit kaunti, dito sa pahina.
ibig sabihin, dito sa lupa.

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