A Poetics of the Literary Work

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REALITY, LANGUAGE, AND IMAGINATION

1. A general perspective or standpoint

What we call "reality" or "our world" is ever *only* our human reality because we have no access to the consciousness of other beings. A cat's perception of reality is its own: the living of it. All our knowing is an endless quest for truth in our experience of the world. What we call the "universal plane" isn't the realm of eternal verities, but rather, the site of everlasting quest and questioning. Where there are no questions, the quest ceases.

Man is the only being among other beings on earth that seeks truth. *Truth-seeking* then is his *being* or essence *as human*. Only the truth satisfies and fulfills his nature; only the truth underwrites humanity's destiny. Everyman has sole responsibility for, and answers to, his *being*. What *meaning* dwells in one's experience of living is its *truth* as its interpretation. The quest for *meaning* then is the personal aspect of the quest for the *truth* of things in Nature and in human affairs. But one's meaning isn't always truth. In a given scientific field, one has either a hypothesis as the most probable *meaning* of an empirical observation or the *truth* of a theory by consensus among scientists or experts in the specific field of that theory; yet, even there, a theory has a certain life span. Where an ambiguity impedes thinking, we grope to have a grip on a possible interpretation of its meaning. We need at times to be skeptical (from the Greek *skeptikos,* "thoughtful"; *skeptesthai*, "to look, consider")—but not radical skepticism which leads to nihilism: self-destruction of one's own *being*.

Language, a conceptual, evocative system of representation, is commonly understood as lexical: words to read; its *being* or nature is *truth-saying* as it speaks. In any language, "honor" is honor, and "murder" is murder. No equivocation: all our words speak true. (Parenthetically, Greek *etymos*, "true," yields the English word "etymon": a word's original, literal meaning or provenance.) It is only the individual who abuses language to lie and deceive himself and others as well. *Ab-use*! from Latin *abusus, abuti*, "to misuse, waste, exhaust"—when, for instance, one scoffs at "human rights," he lies! and wastes his *being*, degrades his human nature.

Now, if we regard language generally as medium or mode of expression to *represent* an aspect or feature of our reality, and the nature of language in its lexical sense is *truth-saying*, it follows that through variant modes of expression, the *being* or nature of all the arts is as *bearer of meaning*: i.e., the meaning of our humanity. Those variant modes of representation are, generally, sound and silence in music, words in all literary works, imagery (either as mimetic or abstract) in painting, material figures and constructs in sculpture and architecture, and theatre as performance in drama, film, and dance—and as well, numbers, signs, and symbols in the natural and social sciences.

In this essay, I focus on the literary work as exemplary because in all art works, Language as variant modes of expression is the Muse, and Imagination, the spirit-guide. The imagination, indeed, must be the mind's finest faculty or power. All great thinkers, leaders, scientists, artists, and inventors are men and women of vigorous imagination. In one online seminar (which a friend shared with me by email), Jean Houston narrates how once, at age 8, she visited along with her schoolmates Albert Einstein at his house in Princeton University. A smart-alecky classmate asked Einstein, "How can we get to be as smart as you?" to which he replied, "Read fairy tales." Another smart-aleck asked, "How do we get to be smarter than you?" Einstein replied, "Read more fairy tales!" Only very much later did she understand "that the imaginal realm is where the most potent ideas—the ones that can change your life or change the world—are held." A popular watchword or mantra from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* goes: "Concepts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind."

2. In the beginning is the word because, without language, we would have no memory, no history, no culture, no civilization.

Language is the finest invention of the imagination as man seeks to know the truth or meaning of his experience: what he perceives or intuits in the world of Nature and human affairs. Language (which translates his experience into

speech) and imagination are one. "When the imagination sleeps," says Albert Camus, "words are emptied of their meaning."[1] It is the imagination makes real to the mind what the mind apprehends in and abstracts from experience. *What is most imagined is what is most real.*

Because language, which is intrinsically sound, is our imagination's invention, it speaks our inviolable being or nature *as human*. As Eduardo Galeano wondrously puts it: "If the grape is made of wine, then perhaps we are the words that tell who we are."[2]

3. "Nothing ever becomes real," says John Keats, "till it is experienced."[3] In that light, to speak, to write, is to get real, each one drawing from his own experience, his own sense of reality *in his own historical time and culture*.

Our day-to-day living is usually uneventful; it passes in routine and rout of memory. But, as Eduardo Galeano would say,[4] what passes back through the heart—e.g., a scene in nature, an incident, an engaging character—is an experience that has its own meaning, its personal truth, in one's memory: imagination's heartland.

One's self-image as his own honest self-knowledge at a given time may be said to be a linguistic construct, but that doesn't make that self any less real. In that light, we create our selves as our self-knowledge grows. As John Keats says, our world is "the vale of Soul-making."[5]

As we reflect on our own experience and on other lives lived or imagined, we draw our worldview, moral compass, ideals, faith. Ultimately, however, neither reason nor science can establish absolute, incontrovertible proof for our ideals which are essentially abstractions—freedom, justice, goodwill, peace, etc. We can only feel and believe *in* our own *being* that our ideals are our truth.

1. *http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert_Camus*. "Reflections on the Guillotine" in *Resistance, Rebellion, Death: Essays*, tr. Justin O'Brien (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1960): 177.
2. Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*, tr. Cedric Belfrage with Mark Schafer (N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1992), 18.
3 John Keats, *Letters of John Keats*, selected by Frederick Page (Oxford University Press, 1954): 250. The etymology of that word, "experience," is quite telling: it comes from Latin *experiri,* "to try or attempt," whence the English words "experiment" and "trial"; *experiri* is also associated with Latin *periculum*, "peril, uncertainty"; Greek, *empeiria* (from *peiran,* "to attempt") means "experience," whence the English, "empirical." Thus the rich import and *nuances* of that singular word, "experience," spell the very nature of all our living, all the meaningfulness of our human condition: to experience is "to try or attempt; to fare or go on a journey; to undergo or to suffer, to endure; and to pass through, that is, to meet with chance and danger, for nothing is certain."
4. Galeano, op. cit.: his epigraph to *The Book of Embraces* which goes "*Recordar*: To remember; from the Latin *re-cordis*, to pass back through the heart."
5. *Letters of John Keats*, op. cit., 266.

Every community (nation) establishes a system of institutions that affirms and upholds all the community's ideals—thence, a government called *democracy, itself an ideal*. In the community, every individual in free discourse seeks a way through critical thinking and vivid imagination to fulfill and achieve the community's ideals. Needless to say, all the community's ideals for every individual's well-being give life to all its government's institutions.

4. Robert Frost says: "The greatest adventure of man is science, the adventure of penetrating into *matter*, into the material universe. But the adventure is our property, *a human property* [our imaginative construct of the material universe; all underscoring mine], and the best description of us is the humanities."[6]

   The literary art (with all the other arts) offers a thoughtful examination of the artist's truth from his own life-experience. As Toni Morrison so well expresses it: "The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined, and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.... Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.... whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word, the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction."[7]

   That is how literature deepens and enriches our *humanity*: through introspection as we read, the literary work communicates with and affirms our *being*. "Every great work," says Albert Camus, "makes the human face more admirable and richer, and this is its whole secret."[8]

5. Language is our Mother Tongue: that is to say, despite their different cultural moorings, all the world's mutable languages are one through their historical diaspora. This is what makes possible the translation (from the Latin *transferre, translatus,* "to carry or ferry across"), the interpretation, from one language to another: one's imagination ferries across from one to the other the words' meaning.

   Our words are essentially abstractions; they do not have their meaning from themselves, or from their differential play, but from lives lived. The words come to

6. From Richard Poirier's interview of Robert Frost in *Writers at Work* / The *Paris Review*, Second Series (Viking Press, 1963; Penguin Books, 1977), 23.
7. Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 Dec. 1993. I owe my copy of this lecture to a student in my graduate class on creative writing, Sarah Lumba-Tajonera. See website https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html
8. *http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert_Camus*. Camus, "Create Dangerously," in *Resistance, Rebellion, Death*, op. cit.: 269.

life only when writer or reader light them up with their imagination; only then are the words brought into interplay in some order by which a thought or feeling is endowed with a definite apprehensible form. From that configuration of well-chosen words, a meaningfulness arises from reader to reader, each one drawing imaginatively from his own experience of the world in his own community of a shared worldview or ideology.

Thus, it isn't meaning as abstraction that language carries, it carries you. As you read, you are also read. Even the words' rhythm as they flow may well also be the very sensation of living. Our tongue as metaphor for language suggests that we would with our words savor our reality, the joy of being alive.

6. Let us dwell a little more on the subject of language.
   a. The words of any language are the living flesh, as it were, of a people's sense of reality, their thought and feeling about their world through their history and culture; therefore, our words already speak us beforehand, we are already spoken for, because the ground of the language we have imbibed from childhood, and speak, and think in, is our people's history and culture; and yet, with those words also, we may speak our own mind, and thereby, even change or transform a community's outlook, values, and prejudices.
   b. Language, long before one speaks, is already by the sounds of its alphabet a form of writing—a translation into words of our reality. The very act of writing too is work of *translation*. The writer ferries across the river of words his own soul's burden without hurt or injury to his own mind's import and aim. Our thoughts and feelings without our words are like brambles—the underbrush of the human psyche, dream, and intuition. Only when the language has been found again *within*—within the language itself truth-saying, and within oneself's being truth-seeking—does the writer discover his subject. That subject or theme is the poet's own clearing within language, his own perception of reality *as lived as imagined* or *as imagined as lived* in his own time and place.

7. One's sense for language is the basic *poetic* sense: that is, one's most intimate sense of reality. I underscore *poetic* because thinking goes with imagining, and as Jacques Derrida says, "There may be forms of thought that think more than does that thought called philosophy."[9]

There is, says Durs Grünbein, "a thinking that … will make certain places visible, individual branches of the anything-but-straightforward psychic cave system that

9. As quoted by Nicolas Harrison in his *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 149.

runs through the bodies of all humans and can only be discovered by a resourceful imagination audaciously pushing forward into still unsecured galleries. This thinking is poetic thinking, and it is not the domain of poets and writers but more the method of many small search parties who have set out from several starting points without knowing of each other, an army of phenomenologists working on expanding the world of the imagination common to all of us."[10]

THE LITERARY WORK

Here I beg my reader's indulgence for a number of reiterations for clarity or emphasis.

1. The poem or literary work is work of language and work of imagination, *both*. The keyword is *work*. As Ezra Pound says, the writer's job of work is to "keep the language efficient:"[11] that is, to *forge* it anew, to refresh or even re-make it so as to transcend its own inadequacies for the precise configuration of a human experience.

   Language has an inherent power to stir one's imagination through (a), those "patterns made by curious and ordinarily irrelevant arrangements—of words, sublexical and suprasegmental linguistic sounds, syntactic schemes, and graphic elements" (which all constitute "the matter of verse" for the poetic representation)—and (b), those "twistings or turnings of sense and reference of words or utterances" (now collectively understood as metaphor or trope) by which the poet's "ultimate concern: the matter of fiction"[12] is achieved.

2. For the poet, Language is his Muse, and the Imagination, his spirit-guide. With his spirit-guide, the poet wrestles with the words as they contend with one another for their own image and light in the weave of his text. The poet's *agon* (Greek for "struggle, contest" which yields the English "agony") is that wrestle with his Muse to wrest his prize: the story, poem, or play he has in mind which, when at last achieved, is his chief reward.

   The poet over time discovers his own way with language, his style, which Albert Camus defines as "the simultaneous existence of reality and of the mind

10. Durs Grünbein, "The Poem and its Secret," tr. from the German by Andrew Shields. I owe my copy of this essay to a student in my graduate class on creative writing, Allan Pastrana. See *Poetry* 189, no. 4 (January 2007): 310-16.

11. Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (1934), chap. 3: "Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear."

12. John Hollander, *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 1-2. Note that Hollander is focused on "poem" as one kind (genre) of literary work, such as the "lyric poem"; thus, he speaks of "the matter of verse" (verbal arrangement or structure) and "the matter of fiction" (what is represented: the imaginal realm).

that gives reality its form."[13] He forges his own path through the lexical wilderness to make his own clearing there. In that wilderness, the words only converse with one another and echo their provenance; the poet listens to catch every nuance of their speech.

For any artist, the only important thing is the work itself: the poem is *what you will*, for the imagination has infinite possibilities, but the final test is "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing"[14]—its medium mastered, the artistic end achieved.

3. The poem isn't so much *written in* a given historical language like English or Tagalog as *wrought from* it. "Wrought" is the past and past participle of "work": that is, "worked into shape by artistry or effort." You might even go further and say, *The poem's language is its own*.

   The English word "verse" (from Latin *versus,* "furrows") already signals too the work of cultivation. As the farmer works the soil to bear his crop, so does the poet work the ground of language to *forge* an apprehensible form or structure for what he imagines. As a tree has a definite configuration—roots, trunks, branches and twigs, leaves—so too the poem or literary work: its *external* form is the whole verbal configuration; its *internal*, its soul or meaningfulness.

4. The subject of any literary work is a human experience *as lived as imagined* or *as imagined as lived*, be that experience only a thought or intuition, a sensation, feeling, or mood, a stance or attitude toward something or other [see Appendix A for specimen poems]. That moment of experience has first been lived and then recalled, imagined, before it is told or written; or, if the experience is purely imagined, as in myth and fantasy, it is as though it has been lived. In either case, for both writer and reader, one draws from his own experience, whether the experience is in one's own living or in one's own life of imagination.

   Where the mind dissolves our experience of the world into ideas and abstractions, the writer seeks the light of the living experience itself. The literary work, once wrought, bears the lineaments of a singular moment, or the singular course of an event, *as lived* or *as imagined*.

   The poem then—whatever its genre or kind—isn't finally its language, it is *the living become word*. Or, if you will, the word made flesh. *The poem is to live.*

13. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1951), 271.
14. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Windhover" in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 3rd ed. (1st ed. by Robert Bridges; enlarged and ed. by W. H. Gardner) (Oxford University Press, 1964), 73.

5. The poem's sole end or purpose—the organizing principle of its form or structure—is, in Horace's words, *dulce et utile*[15]: that is, pleasing and instructive, or as Jonathan Swift might put it, "sweetness and light"[16] —or, freely translated, "revel and revelation."

   The poet aims for his reader to share in (a) his own delight with language: the poet's state of mind as state of play, and (b) the poem's epiphany or insight: a luminance of thought that no idea expresses, a radiance of feeling that no thought apprehends.

   From the poem's meaningfulness arises its effect (*dating*), the *dynamis* or intellectual and emotional power of the poem to interest and persuade us, to make us view and relive the experience and thereby be moved by it. Every literary text is *epideictic*: designed primarily for rhetorical effect; every literary work is *cathectic*: invested with mental and emotional energy. That energy or *dynamis* is its ultimate end, and so, its *being* or nature is as *bearer of meaning.*

   If we demand from the writer a mastery of his medium by which he is able to overcome its limitations, the writer must also exact from his readers the same linguistic mastery. It is the *sense for language* that needs to be cultivated. What deteriorates is not language itself but the sense for it among its users.

THEORY, CRITICISM, INTERPRETATION

1. There are various theories of the poem (the literary work) and thence, various critical approaches.

   The English word "theory" derives from the Greek *theorein*, "to view, inspect, consider" (or *theoria*, "a viewing, contemplation, speculation"). Any theory then is only a way of seeing, a standpoint or perspective. No theory is *apodictic*: that is, "of the nature of necessary truth or absolute certainty"; it has no monopoly of seeing or making sense.

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15. Horace, *De Arte Poetica,* ed. Rev. H. A. Dalton (London: Macmillan, 1941), 23—"Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poëtae, / Aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae" (ll. 333-34): freely translated—"the poet's function is either to improve (*prodesse*) or to give delight (*delectare*); the perfect poet combines both functions. See also J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity,* II (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1961), 76.

16. See Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political & Social Criticism*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 53-54, where Arnold says: "the Greek word *euphuía*, a finely tempered nature, gives exactly the notion of perfection as culture brings us to conceive of it: a harmonious perfection, a perfection in which the characters of beauty and intelligence are both present, which unites 'the two noblest of things, *sweetness and light,*' as Swift calls them in his *Battle of the Books*."

2. The Greek *krinein*, "to divide [i.e., distinguish] and judge," yields the English "criticism, crisis, criterion." The criticism of poetry then implies that there are many kinds (species and even, if you will, subspecies) of literary work, depending only on basic principles or assumptions by which a specific kind through its history might be defined.

   There is tradition, from which the poet draws and hones his craft, and there is individual talent. Since the imagination has limitless possibilities, there are many kinds of literary work, various forms or structures a literary work may take, multiple ways of crafting the work. Their criteria of excellence are either renewed or created from poem to poem, whatever its genre or kind. As with any of the other arts, those criteria of excellence have to do with the poet's mastery of his medium and mastery of a particular mode of expression: that craft or cunning of a way with language toward the construction, the *forging* of his subject or theme.

   Each kind of literary work builds its own expectations from discerning readers; those expectations, too, embody the spirit of their criteria. This is how, over time, literary taste or predilection is formed, or why, over time, readers get used to, or favor, one or the other kind of literary work. *De gustibus non disputandum*: in matters of taste, dispute is disreputable.

3. The poet draws from his own experience, his own sense of reality *in his own time and culture*. His poem's representation of an experience, whether *as lived* or *as only imagined*, is his own apprehension of it.

   Thus, the meaning (Tag., *saysay*: import, significance) of the experience depicted in the poem is what its words can only evoke reader to reader, and so, there may be variant yet plausible readings of it. Consequently, the poem may be said to have a life of its own over the course of time.

   There are poems, of course, whose meaning is clear and definite, and poems whose meaningfulness is richer and deeper where one strives for an adequate enough interpretation.

   One needs to be attentive. The discerning reader, says Marianne Moore, may well be "a literalist of the imagination."[17] His agile sense for language enables him to be acclimatized in the writer's own distinctive style or way with language. He

17. Marianne Moore, "Poetry," in *Complete Poems* (Penguin Books, 1981), 36, 266-67. In her note on her poem, "Poetry," what Marianne Moore quotes from A. H. Bullen's work on Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), is quite apropos: "The limitation of [Yeats'] view," says Bullen, "was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too *literal realist of the imagination*, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind's eye, when exalted by inspiration, were 'eternal existences,' symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments" [italics mine].

reads close to open the word-weave and enter imaginatively into the experience. As it was for the poet, for the reader too, the poem is to live.

4. Interpreting a writer's work is the crux of critical understanding; the Latin words are illuminating—*interpretari,* "to negotiate"; *interpres,* "agent."

   The literary work is *already* an interpretation of an experience. To interpret it is to be its agent; one negotiates with it to come to a settlement of its meaning (*saysay).* However, the literary work—poem or story or play—has already *literally* come to terms with itself; the critic then or interpreter must respect the work's integrity for, as both work of language and work of imagination, it is *autotelic*: that is, governed solely by its own end, a purpose *in*, not apart from, itself. This is what we mean by the poem's autonomy and "organic unity." For what artistic end does a poem have except the representation of an experience, that verbal configuration we call the poem's form or structure by which we are persuaded and moved.

5. The poem's *being* or nature is its meaningfulness (*diwa:* soul). That *meaningfulness* is the very spirit of what it is to be a *human being*, its nightshade and its sunrise, both. In that light, both the writing and the reading are a *spiritual* experience. The poem's diwa is its moral or ethical dimension: what raises it to a universal plane.

   Not all our words, after the truly great poem or literary work has been accomplished, can catch that meaningfulness.

CONCLUSION

A writer's lifetime vocation is a calling from language. Language is the medium of his art, but he himself is—or becomes—its medium: "a habitation of the Word."[18] The call comes from the genius of any language that he has mastered: that genius, a playful and freedom-loving spirit.

What is that calling? If language itself could speak, what is it saying? Wallace Stevens' poem, "To the Roaring Wind,"[19] seems to bear a special message for writers and thinkers: Listen!

> What syllable are you seeking,
> Vocalissimus,
> In the distances of sleep?
> Speak it.

18. William H. Gass, *Habitations of the Word: Essays* (NY: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1986).
19. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 113.

Language's call is subtle. It begins with pictures, and the alphabet and their murmurous brood of words, and endless tales in childhood and early youth. Later comes an impression that enthralls—there must be a mythic or spiritual realm within language toward which one's workaday world moves. It would then seem that language is the last human frontier. If one could cross it, there would be a new heaven, a new earth.

Language is absolutely literal, it fixes things with their names: "a rose is a rose is a rose," says Gertrude Stein.[20] But language secretly yearns to be free from its own prison-house: to repeat what Toni Morrison says, "it arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.... Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable." It is the writer's calling then to free it, to enable it to transcend itself. As Yves Bonnefoy says: "*This is why we write poems.* Through them, we try to fix in our consciousness — it, too, formed by language — those *moments that open to the intuition that all language refuses.*"[21] (Underscoring mine; it is well worth quoting Bonnefoy more fully.)

The finest poetry then, it would seem, is "an experience of what goes beyond words" which gives one a sense, though *transient,* of

> ... that Oneness that exists beyond possessions and dreams — the illusion, understanding itself as such, becoming again a threshold. A beautiful thought, [this,] but more imagined and desired than truly lived. (From the same interview with Bonnefoy: 164)

20. Gertrude Stein, "Sacred Emily," (1913) in *Geography and Plays* (1922) —Wikipedia.

21 "I don't agree [says Bonnefoy] with a number of contemporary critics who see poems merely as verbal constructions, as what simply activates and multiplies the relations that exist between words.... I have always thought that poetry is an experience of what goes beyond words: call it the fleeting perception, then the more active remembrance, of a state of indifferentiation, of unity — that state that characterizes reality at the level that our language cannot reach, despite its definitions, its designations, and its descriptions.... [in that state of unity] the part becomes the whole, consciousness is no longer kept separate from it ... But language has replaced this immediacy in our relation to the world with a system of representation which is nothing more than a partial view of it ... we would be lost if it weren't for poetry. Why poetry? Because by paying attention as it does to the sonorous part of words, to their capacity for rhythm, for music, poetry allows a relation to be established between words that is no longer simply the play of those abstract concepts that normally constitute our language. For a moment, the usual reading of the world, that network of figures which keeps Presence hidden, is neutralized, torn open; we stand before each thing as though before the entire universe, in an absolute that seems to welcome us. And this is why we write poems. Through them, we try to fix in our consciousness — it, too, formed by language—those moments that open to the intuition that all language refuses." "Interview with Yves Bonnefoy" by John Naughton in Naughton's translation of Bonnefoy's *In the Shadow's Light* (University of Chicago Press, 1991): 162-64.

In "Auguries of Innocence,"[22] William Blake intuited too, I should think, that "Oneness":

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an Hour.

But how does it happen for poetry to open our consciousness to that intuition "that all language refuses"? Through that dream-work of imagination and memory, I should think, by which a language—that abstract "system of representation [which] fragments [the] unity" of all that we perceive as real —is deployed, as best as one can, to *evoke* in poetry's music the reality of an experience.

Durs Grünbein puts it this way: "I believe that what comes out in poems is the human devotion to the transcendental—with a simultaneous fidelity to this world's prodigious wealth of details. ... Only among the poets does one come across ... those successful moments of reconciliation of something purely ideal with its unexpectedly concrete manifestations, less often among theologians, and almost never among philosophers.... Richard Rorty [says]: 'It is in the nature of intellectual and spiritual progress that philosophers constantly shift back and forth between quasi-scientific argumentation and non-argumentative flights of the poetic imagination. They move to the one whenever they become frustrated with the other.' ... [The poetic imagination] could change the world, if it were only noticed one day."[23]

A FINAL NOTE

While I agree with formalist critics as to formal excellence in the craft of writing, I would yet insist that a purely formalist perspective would evacuate our poems of the Filipino sense of his world, deplete them of the grit and grace and lively humor in our people's day-to-day living where the poem *as wrought* has earned its saysay and diwa.

22. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman; commentary by Harold Bloom; newly revised edition (Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1988), 490.

23. Durs Grünbein, op. cit.: "The Poem and Its Secret." He observes that "the art of poetry [seems to be] the blind spot in the cultural memory of modern man.... Presumably, it has to do with that fickle memory itself, with its amnesia for everything that is not useful, that has not become primarily power, technology, capital, ideology, or physical force."

Since (to repeat) the meanings of our words arise mainly from lives lived through a people's history and culture, the poem's inmost seal is the poet's country. For one's country is how one imagines her. A country is what a people's imagination owes its allegiance to. Their literature by their writers is what creates their sense of country, which ultimately is forged by their sense for language. Their literature is their racial memory. A people is only as strong as their memory, imagination's heartland.

The writer stands upon his own ground, his own native clearing: the way his fellow-countrymen think and feel about their world, and so live from sun to sun. There, in that clearing, he forges language in the smithy of his mind and heart and grasps his own authentic self. There, in the poetry as wrought, if one reads close and imagines well, the poet may well be his own country's best critic and interpreter, and thereby, he might refresh or enrich a current vision of his country's destiny, or renew a lost heritage or even transform it.

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APPENDIX A

1. The Poem as Experience

The poem, once wrought, bears the lineaments of a singular moment in the poet's experience, or the singular course of an event, *as lived* or *as imagined*: say,

A feeling, mood, or emotional cry:

NVM Gonzalez, "Behold the bountiful land"[24]

Behold the bountiful land,
the young hills and the corn;
in the green river's womb
children are born;

Honey's in the forest,
blue fish in the sea;
the ash-gray of the clearings
grows grain for me.

24. See *Man of Earth* [henceforth, ME]: *An Anthology of Filipino Poetry and Verse* from *English 1905 to the Mid-'50s*, ed. Gémino H. Abad and Edna Z. Manlapaz (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1989), 139.

Or a thought or train of reflection:

Horacio de la Costa, SJ, "After Two Months in Prison"[25]

Now I know the bitter tears,
The dull despair, the frantic rages,
The sleep-destroying hopes and fears
Of fish in bowls and birds in cages.

Or a scene in nature:

Conrado S. Ramirez, "To Hitomaro"[26]

In Nara still the herons fly,
A line of snow across the sky;
The morning-glory drapes the wall;
But though the pool knows not the rain,
The dead frog floods it still with ghosts of song.

Or a character or event in our day-to-day world:

Angela C. Manalang-Gloria: "Old Maid Walking on a City Street"[27]

She had a way of walking through concupiscence
And past the graces her fingers never twirled:
Because her mind refused the heavy burden,
Her broad feet shovelled up the world.

25. ME: 148.
26. ME: 98.
27. ME: 69.

Or a stance or attitude toward something or other:

Jose F. Lacaba, "Apologia Pro Vita Sua"[28]

Pardon me, madam,
that love cannot madden
me — I have phlegm for blood,
frenzy I forbid,

unless in darkness
where I can probe, dartle
and startle in passing.
A place for passion

and passion in its place
is code of middle class,
and middle class I am
even in orgasm.

2. The Reader as "Literalist of the Imagination"

To apprehend the poem's form, the reader or critic needs to be "a literalist of the imagination." We cannot over-stress this. Take Conrado V. Pedroche's "River-Winds"[29]:

In the evening
The river-winds take the village
In their arms,
Whispering fragments of old lost songs;
And, pulling a blanket of dreams
Over the sleeping roofs,
Softly, softly move on ...

Only by work of imagination on the reader's part is that singular perception of an evening in a riverine village made real, and it was the poet's verbal configuration

28. *A Habit of Shores: Filipino Poetry and Verse* from *English, '60s to the '90s*, ed. Gémino H. Abad (Quezon City: UP Press, 1999), 117.

29. ME: 88.

— the poem's precise form or structure — that made that realization possible. Or take Carlos A. Angeles's "Landscape II"[30] (last stanza):

> Now, while the dark basins the void of space,
> Some sudden crickets, ambushing me near,
> Discover vowels of your whispered face
> And subtly cry. I touch your absence here
> Remembering the speeches of your hair.

Only by work of the imagination (as it was with the poet) is the experience of a lover's desolation of yearning brought to life. Again, it was the poet's power of expression—those "twistings or turnings of sense and reference of words and utterances"—that now persuades and moves his reader. To read close and imagine well is to open the text.

30. *A Native Clearing: Filipino Poetry and Verse* from *English since the '50s to the Present / From Edith L. Tiempo to Cirilo F. Bautista*, ed. Gémino H. Abad (Quezon City: UP Press, 1993), 117.